Book review: Stefan Lorenz Sorgner's *Transhumanismus:"Die gefährlichste Idee der Welt"!?* (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 2016)

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Stefan Lorenz Sorgner is professor of philosophy at the John Cabot University in Rome and one of the leading experts in the field of post- and transhumanism. Sorgner's new book *Transhumanismus: "Die gefährlichste Idee der Welt"!?* (English: Transhumanism: "The Most Dangerous Idea in the World"!?) serves as both an introduction to the topic and an overview of the intentions and aims of transhumanism.

The book is divided into five parts. In his introductory comments, the author starts by pointing out that transhumanism brings a number of possible advantages. He makes clear that transhumanism, despite those possible advantages is often faced with prejudices. Of these, one of the most popular is that all transhumanists pursue the prospect of immortality. Sorgner aims to counter these prejudices by presenting a clear and informed analysis of the relevant body of transhumanist philosophy (p. 13).

The first part, entitled "Ist der Transhumanismus die gefährlichste Idee der Welt?" (English: "Is transhumanism the most dangerous idea in the world?"), deals with the ambiguous differentiation between transhumanism and posthumanism. Here Sorgner refers to Fereidoun M. Esfandiary (FM-2030) who according to Sorgner accredits superhuman abilities to the transhuman, while still defining the transhuman as being part of the human species, whereas the posthuman for him would be defined as a being that is located beyond the human. By contrast, Nick Bostrom supports the viewpoint that the posthuman might indeed be attributed with special abilities, but still belongs to the human species (p. 18).

Sorgner analyzes a distinct difference between transhumanism and posthumanism in relation to the respective philosophical traditions. He argues that transhumanism originates in the naturalistic and utilitarian reasoning of the English-speaking discourse, whereas posthumanism finds its origins in continental philosophy (p. 21). According to Sorgner, transhumanism is multifaceted and diverse. Thus one can find social-democratic positions, prominently represented by James Hughes, as well as more libertarian positions, including the ideas of Max More. Irrespective of the various positions and influences, the overall aim of transhumanism is to develop trans- and posthuman possibilities further through the application of new technologies. Because of this, transhumanism is also essentially concerned with questions of human enhancement, understood as a means to an end, which is something Sorgner takes up in the next part of his book.

In the second part, entitled "Eine Landkarte der Verbesserung" (English: A geographical map of enhancement), Sorgner presents an overview of the enhancement variations that are most discussed at the moment. He not only mentions enhancement of emotions, physiological functioning, and intellectual abilities, but also analyzes the option of genetic enhancement, which has been very controversial, especially in the discussions conducted in German (p. 41 ff.). Sorgner explains that, whereas bioconservatives like Jürgen Habermas, Michael Sandel and Francis Fukuyama reject the idea of genetic-technological enhancement, bioliberals, such as Julian Savulescu, present a contrary opinion. Transhumanists explicitly advocate genetic enhancement and regard it as a possible and desirable instrument on the way to a posthuman future.

In the third part of the book, entitled "Stammbäume des Meta-, Post- und Transhumanismus" (English: Genealogical trees of meta-, post- and transhumanism), the author focuses on the task of clearly differentiating transhumanism from posthumanism conceptually. This is necessary, as the terms are often used incorrectly, especially in the academic discourse. At the same time, Sorgner identifies the little known position of metahumanism. Metahumanism can be understood in two different ways. On the one hand, it can be located beyond the dualism of body and soul. In this sense, metahumanism has to be distinguished from humanism, as humanism, on Sorgner's account, is defined by a categorical ontological duality. On the other hand, Sorgner understands metahumanism as a mediating authority located between transhumanism and posthumanism (p. 83). Metahumanism therefore aims at bridging the gap between transhumanist and posthumanist thought.

The fourth part of the book is entitled "Nietzsche and Transhumanism." It is no secret that Nietzsche is regarded as the forefather of transhumanism in parts of the transhumanist movement, while being rejected in other parts of the movement. Sorgner shows that for Nietzsche the *Übermensch* defines the *raison d'être* of being. In other words: It would be the human's task to advance to the *Übermensch* through the process of self-improvement. In the eyes of Nietzsche, however, the *Übermensch* cannot be made or created, but rather develops in the form of an evolutionary step. This step can be facilitated, yet it cannot be forcedly made or taken. The *Übermensch* becomes a possible option only when "higher humans" – humans with special character traits – work on enhancing their capacities. According to Sorgner, this does not exclude the use of technology (p. 132ff.). Sorgner successfully uses Nietzsche's ideas for his own transhumanist position, as becomes especially apparent in the last part of the book.

In the fifth and final part, entitled "12 Säulen transhumanistischer Diskurse" (English: 12 pillars of transhumanist discourse), Sorgner defines which aspects constitute weak transhumanism in his eyes, even though the term *weak* is to be understood as carrying no adverse judgment. On the contrary, the term implies that weak transhumanism is not merely a transhumanist position: it also refers to certain posthumanist approaches, and so merges transhumanist and posthumanist positions. (This connection is what Sorgner understands as metahumanism.)

One essential pillar of transhumanist discourse is the fact that transhumanists reject the idea of the human species as something categorically exceptional. In contrast, what makes the human species special can be located in its gradual differences from other biological species: for example, human beings possess a higher form of intelligence and the ability to act morally (p. 145ff.). Sorgner argues that another essential pillar is constituted in the assumption that genetic selection is a morally legitimate option. This is why he does not see a fundamental – but rather a gradual – difference between selection of genes via a free choice of partners or via preimplantation genetic diagnosis (p. 152).

A third pillar defined by Sorgner is also worth mentioning, as it takes genetic modification for reproduction as a future variation of education. For Sorgner, education constitutes not only a conventional, but also a legally grounded form of enhancement. Advancing education through new technological possibilities, as can be seen in the form of genetic engineering, thus seems to be a plausible option (p. 154ff.). Aside from considerations of moral enhancement and the plurality of the good, which would assume that deafness for example might indeed be desirable, Sorgner postulates yet another pillar of transhumanism, which promises the overcoming of speciesism. This brings up the interesting and challenging question of which moral principles and criteria should be applied when dealing with human-animal hybrids, cyborgs, or digital uploads in the form of whole-brain emulations.

Sorgner provides a detailed and distinct overview of what defines transhumanism and what is understood as transhumanism. His knowledge of the international state of scientific research and of the continental and utilitarian traditions of moral philosophy underline the fact that the book is a very informative and fascinating read. At the same time, Sorgner does not hesitate to point out polemics brought forward by famous thinkers and writers only to counter these with concise, comprehensible and cogent arguments to make the transhumanist position clear.

The way in which Sorgner manages to illustrate his own position, which he defines as metahumanist, and which includes both transhumanist and posthumanist aspects, is striking. It is especially striking because in the German-speaking discourse such considerations, which include genetic enhancement as a variation on education, are clearly rejected within the current academic discourse. In the German context, therefore, it can be regarded as extremely brave that Sorgner opens up such a perspective on the topic, illustrating it vividly to his readers.

It would have been desirable if the author had given slightly more consideration to the *concept* of human enhancement (not only referring to examples of the phenomenon). For example, one position in the extensive literature on this topic treats human enhancement as referring to the enhancement of humans explicitly and merely through new technologies. This position, however, does not agree with the concept, clearly favored by Sorgner, that education is a form of enhancement. Education might utilize specifically "educational" techniques. At the same time, however, it always aims at using these techniques to protect someone's freedom and enhance their self-determination, rather than seeking to limit or deny it. Therefore an enhancement of the human which simply "adds" technological advancements to a human body, could not be considered "educational." The opposition that arises between these two positions should not be overlooked.

Second, it would have been helpful if the author had discussed the possibilities of human enhancement in relation to current hegemonic power structures. Overcoming boundaries, even those in relation to the human self, always takes place within the context of pre-existing structures. It is these that facilitate the appearance of new technologies in the first place. And at the same time, the pre-existing structures make it essential that technologies for self-enhancement and overcoming the self are used and developed. Therefore, the advancement of transhumanist and posthumanist ideas as well as their practical implementations might be seen not only as a possibility but also, perhaps, as a necessity, one that needs to

be embraced and developed further in order to ensure one's own existence. It would have been worth exploring how this imperative relates to existing power structures.

At this point, the book has been published only in German. However, Sorgner's ideas offer great opportunities and benefit for his German-speaking readers, since the book offers a chance to theorize transhumanism in a wider public discourse very accurately defining what the concept of transhumanism is. This is supported not only by Sorgner's argumentative precision but also by the fact that his writing is easy to read without being simplistic, something that cannot be taken for granted in the German-language discourse on transhumanism.