

Book Review

“Philosophy of Posthuman Art.” Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, 2022, Schwabe Verlag.

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Weisheit: das scheint dem Pöbel eine Art Flucht zu sein, ein Mittel und Kunststück, sich gut aus einem schlimmen Spiele herauszuziehn; aber der rechte Philosoph — so scheint es uns, meine Freunde? — lebt „unphilosophisch“ und „unweise“, vor Allem unklug, und fühlt die Last und Pflicht zu hundert Versuchen und Versuchungen des Lebens: — er risquirt sich beständig, er spielt das schlimme Spiel....

Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 205

Sometimes I feel that Sorgner's ideas can foresee the questions I can ask about his philosophy. But I cannot claim that he is a prophet of Apollo. Instead, his latest work continues to embrace a Dionysian constant, showing the reaches of an ontology of permanent becoming and putting into practice his own understanding of philosophy, namely an "Intellectual War of Values" (2017; 2022a, 43-49). Such a statement is Heraclitean and, therefore, also Nietzschean. In this sense, *Philosophy of Posthuman Art* is not a work independent of the author's other works, but a necessary consequence of his global intellectual production.

If we admit that *We have always been cyborgs* (2022b), then it is time to illustrate how cyborgs take care of themselves in a world that still struggles with new ways of understanding ourselves against a too humanistic background. In this sense, while much of Sorgner's book is concerned with analyzing various forms and examples of trans-, post- and meta-human artistic expressions, in my view the most interesting aspect of the book is the development of the categories that position Sorgner's philosophy much closer to critical posthumanism than to traditional transhumanism. Although, perhaps, Sorgner's philosophy never really aimed to possess a fully transhuman wisdom, but rather to constantly risk reaching coherent guidelines from which we can think of ourselves in the present.

At first glance, one might take the obvious for granted and think that Sorgner is only arguing with Adorno's aesthetic theory (2022a, p. 13). But, in fact, he is also arguing with philosophical positions that deny perspectivism, namely New Realism (2022a, p. 47). It is strange that Sorgner again reminds us of his suspicions of the potential totalitarian thinking of intellectuals such as Maurizio Ferraris but fails to note that other authors in the same vein, such as Markus Gabriel in his book *The Power of Art* (2020), assert something similar, namely

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3

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autonomy as a keynote for works of art. Rather than insisting on how interesting this discussion could be, what is key is the immediate actuality of Sorgner's thought. Being a cyborg also implies contesting the arena of philosophical interpretations. This is Sorgner's war of values.

Even more interesting is the fact that this war for values is not only directed at one opponent but is also taken to the terrain from which Sorgner has raised his own thinking: transhumanism. This attitude against its own presuppositions seems to me to be a philosophically coherent action with respect to the affirmation of an ontology of permanent becoming and therefore also a perspectivist epistemology. Consequently, there is no such thing as "truth". At least not a single, immutable, universal truth. This is why even transhumanism is not untouchable for our author.

In my opinion, this attitude would explain why Sorgner positions himself in describing transhumanism from a much more critical perspective than in his previous works (2022, pp. 49-52). Transhumanism must undergo a twist if it wants to continue to dialogue with the diverse forms of thought of the present. Neither pure rationalism nor materialism could be the basis of this movement's proposals for enhancement. The key is the following statement:

"A naturalist account of the word implies that all entities can in principle be accessed empirically. This does not mean that all entities can already by [sic] investigated empirically, but it implies at least that in principle an empirical analysis of all entities is possible" (2022a, pp. 50-51)

Such a statement is very suggestive of how we can relate philosophically to transhumanism, as many spokesmen for transhumanism have a poor humanist background. This has always made me wonder why this movement can be a case study for philosophy and not simply be relegated to the ideological proposals of a handful of Americans or British with access to a lot of money. Whatever "mind" is, if it cannot be fully empirically analyzed, then there is little point in spending material resources on transferring the minds of a few to a cloud or cryopreserving others. An ontology of permanent becoming also invites us to embrace death. We cyborgs are not Platonic hyper-humanists, at least not if we understand ourselves from Sorgner's point of view.

The key to this distance from the classical assumptions of transhumanism is well explained in the book. The metahumanist performs a very interesting gesture by using the word "twist" (*Verwindung*) and differentiating it from "overcoming" (*Überwindung*). I have often wondered whether transhumanism could be philosophically enhanced, and I think Sorgner is at least giving me a clue here. The notions of "twist" and enhancement may not be compatible insofar as the latter requires discarding something that no longer works for us —as parts of our human condition— in order to achieve a new form of existence. Moreover, perhaps in comparing the two notions I am making a categorical error insofar as enhancement is predicated, at least, on human conditions and potentialities, whereas "twist" is predicated on our own self-understanding and our understanding of the ontological presuppositions we embrace.

Honestly, this new notion of "twist" gives me a hard time because I thought it would be possible to "philosophically enhance" transhumanism by offering philosophically coherent interpretations that could underpin its proposals. Such an exercise, in my view, could be identified in *On Transhumanism* and *We have always been cyborgs*. However, one could now read all of Sorgner's work on transhumanism as an exercise in twisting the movement itself. It was not so long ago that Russell Blackford said that

I also wonder whether he is too quick (and too keen) to absolve transhumanism of any commitment to pursue physical immortality or the best possible substitute. All of this merits further and deeper reflection that must await another occasion (2017, p. 203)

Perhaps *Philosophy of Posthuman Art* is the place where these deeper reflections on this question are presented. The need to provide a coherent philosophical foundation for transhumanism then requires the coining of new words (2022a, p. 54) that would not make us abandon previous ideas altogether, but reinterpret them, taking separate ontological categories and explaining them by overcoming possible performative self-contradiction — such as the soul/body duality that here can be explained from a naturalistic and evolutionist perspective as psychophysiological (2022a, p. 36; 56)—. In more precise words, this procedure can be understood as an "ontological weakening process" (2022a, p. 59) that requires diminishing the ideological and universalist violence of our beliefs. In this way, Sorgner brings the pluralism resulting from his nihilistic epistemology and ethic (2022b, p. 17-18) into the field of aesthetics, opening up relations with art beyond the understandings of Adorno, humanism and New Realism.

Consistent with a classic review, *Philosophy of Posthuman Art* (2022a) is divided into eight chapters that introduce key aspects to develop broad spaces of reflection around Posthuman art forms. Although Sorgner shows a wide range of analyses of works of art, I would like to present some concerns about a case that he highlights on several occasions. I am referring to Eduardo Kac's Alba Rabbit.

Alba is used by Sorgner as a specific case of art that would be misappreciated by the Frankfurt School tradition (2022a, p. 29). Then, in order to go beyond the humanist dualisms that are presupposed in such a philosophy of art, the metahumanist proposes to analyze works of art from a naturalistic and evolutionary perspective (2022a, p. 30). The specificity of this mode of art is presented as bioart, an art form that "needs to involve living organism like Alba" (2022a, p. 33). According to Sorgner this would not be a problem, because from a perspective beyond Christian humanism "We have always been ruling entities, and we have become ruling and altered" (2022a, p. 35).

However, I have a personal problem with this art form. Honestly, I avoid eating meat —but I am not yet a vegan— for the simple fact that non-human animals seem to me to be much more interesting and valuable entities than we are. I understand, of course, that we exist in a world where power creates hierarchical structures and, in my view, cyborgs and their relations with the world are also part of these power games. Sloterdijk was quite right to talk about the rules for the human zoo, and now, with Sorgner, one can also admit that it is necessary to think about rules for the cyborg zoo. These rules are fictions, as the author made clear in his previous book. Negative freedom is a fiction that functions as a minimum guarantee for social relations free of paternalism and violence. But does this only apply to cyborgs?

I know that freedom, respect, and rights are useful fictions for Sorgner, and I share his opinion. But in what sense is it a useful fiction to use a rabbit to produce works of bioart? Of course, it can be answered that the artist has every right to enjoy his contemplative and active life to carry out whatever experiments he wants, especially if he is twisting the categories that we understand as natural with respect to a living entity. However, are we not taking a paternalistic attitude towards the rabbit? I cannot say that the attitude is violent, because apparently the rabbit did not suffer from the genetic modification. But the question remains the same: why would it be a trans- /post- or meta-human art form to use animals for our leisure?

The immediate answer is clear: we experiment on animals because it is practical, and we can obtain information with which we can then experiment on ourselves. So, we are still human, with a special place in existence only now based on the power to steer and alter entities. Are cyborgs still too human-like entities? Perhaps we are no longer god-like entities, but only entities that interpret the world from pure power. Unfortunately, such cases could be taken to the extreme and one might wonder whether there are no second-class entities for trans or post-artists to experiment with. Is the Alba rabbit a product of critical posthumanist art (Sorgner, 2022a, p. 63) and is it not yet another colonialist and too human way of relating to other entities? Besides, it doesn't seem very democratic to me either, not everyone has a laboratory at their disposal to experiment with hybrids. It might even remain a very elitist art form.

If the negative freedom rule is to be upheld, does it only apply to cyborgs? If so, who are indeed worthy of being called cyborgs? I know that Sorgner's statement is ontological, however, from a historical and situated perspective what I can do as a Latin American entity that steers and alters is very different from what someone like Elon Musk can do. Historically, this side of the world has been altered and guided by the North.

In this sense, I consider that if we are to generate guidelines for a posthuman philosophy —even beyond art—then Vattimo's concept of *κένωσις* must also apply to cyborgs (2022a, p. 122). That is to say, if we want to submit ourselves to an enhancement coherent with an ontology of permanent becoming, we might as well twist our relationship with the other natural entities with which we cohabit. If we embrace negative freedom, why not consult another human if they want to be part of an artistic or biological experiment before having paternalistic relations with animals? Because a human who can volunteer for an experiment might give us information closer to ourselves than a gorilla, a mouse, or a rabbit. So, it seems important to me to empty the cyborg of any hierarchy that would enable paternalism with other natural entities. There is no reason to believe that animals want to be part of our experiments, and it is true that we experiment on them because it is useful, but shouldn't we try to avoid paternalism towards all entities that are like us?

Following this line of reasoning, it is noteworthy that Sorgner states: "We play, act and create, but it is no longer plausible that reflecting on eternal truths is an intrinsically valuable playful activity" (2022a, p. 129). I agree, there is nothing valuable by itself. However, if we consider that the possibility to play, act and create depends on maintaining a healthy relationship with the world, then perhaps we need to twist the ways in which we relate to natural entities. We have always been cyborgs, apparently living in a world that does exist and must be cared for because from a naturalistic perspective the ecological crisis cannot be considered a useful fiction. I extend a public invitation to my dear Stefan L. Sorgner to reflect on the relationship between animals, the ecological crisis and posthuman thinking.

In this review I have not referred in particular detail to the other art forms analyzed by Sorgner. My attention was focused, above all, on the shaping of discourses that allow the author to offer guidelines for thinking of ourselves from a posthuman perspective. I think, in this way, that this book must be one of those that most invites us to think about how we understand ourselves, and it does so in a quite gentle and expert way. The reading of the metahumanist is always an invitation to risk, to play beyond the safe, and that is exactly what Sorgner does: twisting and allowing others to twist the presuppositions from which his most original thought arises. The war for values therefore gains new weapons for the upcoming philosophical debates.

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