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Book Review

Sorgner, S. L. (2021). *We Have Always Been Cyborgs. Digital Data, Gene Technologies, and an Ethics of Transhumanism*. Bristol University Press. 216 pages, 123,17 EUR. ISBN: 978-1529219203.

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Abstract: One facet of Stefan Lorenz Sorgner's scholarship is immediately visible in his diligent academic production: the 21st Century is a leading spatio-temporal unit of his analyses. Although such assessment could be considered a rough generalization, it should not be taken for granted. To be placed in the contextual core of the current epoch is of particular relevance with respect to multiple academic trajectories Sorgner navigates and is almost always an achievement rather than an expected, ready-made content. Namely, more often than not, especially in authorship with transhumanist labels, the temporal and conceptual curves are not subtly controlled and fine-tuned into a well-balanced thinking product that contributes to facing the current and potential issues of the relatively near and projectively feasible futures. Such gross asymmetry has various dangerous consequences Sorgner unequivocally warns about, opting deliberately to be an active chronicler of the 'history of the present' instead. This approach entails the dismissal of 'guaranteed' futurity vectors, be it Christian linearity or Kurzweilian exponentiality, but no less of petrified presentism or conventional historical layers of any inherited anthropology and the specific ethical account it is built upon.

Keywords: cyborg, transhumanism, posthumanism, metahumanism, ethics, Big Data, Gene Technologies, enhancement, pluralism, goodness

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One facet of Stefan Lorenz Sorgner's scholarship is immediately visible in his diligent academic production: the 21st Century is a leading spatio-temporal unit of his analyses. Although such assessment could be considered a rough generalization, it should not be taken for granted. To be placed in the contextual core of the current epoch is of particular relevance with respect to multiple academic trajectories Sorgner navigates and is almost always an achievement rather than an expected, ready-made content.

Namely, more often than not, especially in authorship with transhumanist labels, the temporal and conceptual curves are not subtly controlled and fine-tuned into a well-balanced thinking product that contributes to facing the current and potential issues of the relatively near and *projectively feasible* futures. Such gross asymmetry has various dangerous consequences Sorgner unequivocally warns about, opting deliberately to be an active chronicler of the 'history of the present' instead. This approach entails the dismissal of 'guaranteed' futurity vectors, be it Christian linearity or Kurzweilian exponentiality, but no less of petrified presentism or conventional historical layers of any inherited anthropology and the specific ethical account it is built upon.

Accordingly, beyond sweet paternalistic and quasi-sectarian temptations of ecstatic utopianism and nonfoundational optimism, in the new monograph, *We Have Always Been Cyborgs. Digital Data, Gene Technologies, and an Ethics of Transhumanism*, Sorgner locates his theoretical proposal in the form of a positive analytic rigorism, fueled by pragmatic enthusiasm, which is a characteristic signature of his research profile. Or more precisely,

following the author, it is sui generis "positive pessimism" (17), a philosophically informed structural requirement for thinking with(in) *conditio transhumana*. In a multiverse of contingent nodal points, as an ontological outcome of continual becoming, nihilism follows in its various forms; Sorgner pinpoints "alethic" and "ethical" ones for this purpose (17; 18). Either way, the ever lack of fixed grounding and consequent suffering that grows out of such situatedness does not imply the absence of constant, mainly technologically driven endeavors of "enlightened" humanity to support and foster human flourishing. However, this tendency requires full capacities of societal and planetary forces, in other words – a 'not-only-human' consensus based on gradual response-ability of entities, established in our very best faith (139 et sim.).

This book encompasses Sorgner's transhumanist journey from ontical and ontological premises towards ethical ones. Along the lines of his "as-good-as-it-gets" ethical proposal, based on negative freedom and "liberal ethics of a fictitious autonomy" it implies (47; 48), Sorgner explicitly tends to inject a convincing philosophical foundation into the transhumanist reflections. A philosopher among transhumanists and a transhumanist among philosophers (bringing together the two domains but vigilantly avoiding the unreflective merge), Sorgner forges genuine meta-position as a flux that fits both his intellectual sensibility and the epochal needs:

"It is non-utilitarian, non-utopian, and non-linear. It does not imply strong truth-claims. It is also non-anthropocentric, non-essentialist, and non-dualistic like most critical posthumanist philosophies. Hence, it lies in between post- and transhumanism. There is the need to think in between post- and transhumanism, if one doubts the existence of a categorically dualistic ontological anthropology. We ought to think in between post- and transhumanism, and affirm a type of metahumanism instead (110)."

The book is mapped into four master sections, along with the fifth wrap-up part concluding in a compressed 'declaration of sanguinity', to put it emphatically. As an outset, the reader is offered [1] *Transhumanism: In a Nutshell*, the in-depth depiction of the increasingly polycentric building of transhumanism(s). Here, the author influentially guides the audience throughout its diverse historical, political, philosophical, and technological sectors from the perspective of a resident, trained to always embark into strategic 'outsidership' upon self-imposed demand. The departments of this tower of thought are reasonably extensive, stretching from insights concerning liberal political inspiration and human *transitionality* (F.M. Esfandiary, 1973., seen as one of the leading postulates of Nietzschean trans-anthropic paradigm) towards the enhancement techniques of various origins bringing about fitting concepts of goodness.

Despite such a vast span, Sorgner extracts one cornerstone engendering the design of both constancy and continuity, i.e., the ever-existing cyborgian, enhancement-based fabric of human ontology (9; 160 et sim.). In this optics, the notion of human is always *in statu emergendi* and thus always transitory within the proverbial *Haus des Seins*. There is no static articulation that could ever be definitive and all-determining: "We are constantly changing hybrid cyborgs" (161). It is not only the Spinozian ontology of becoming and steering nature of the concept of human Sorgner has in mind. It is always-already a cross-breeding and 'transgenic-ready', hybrid-like entity. Therefore, the *transhuman* (*cyborg* for this purpose or the *posthuman*, depending on a precise terminology Sorgner picks situationally) is not merely a particular, expected-or-fought-against, eschatological output of human nature in its first post-traditional outline. This perspective rather indicates an ever-present dynamics of re-articulation within human subjectivity that requires shifted fashion of how humanist theoretico-practical horizons should be conceptualized.

The author's substantial thesis that the enhancement paradigm is not an additional feature, but rather the actual way of how the (trans-)humans are, self-explains why the following two parts [2] *On a Silicon-based Transhumanism* and [3] *On a Carbon-based Transhumanism* need to be seen in a mutually informed dialogue. The axis of argumentation is consequently based on the specific enhancement techniques shaping each particular onto-organization the two chapters problematize (i.e., carbon-based and silicon-based ones). The thorough analysis of mind-uploading and immortality concepts follows, questioning the obsolete conceptual anatomy of modernist personologies, the notion of life/death cross-sections, post-aging, and many more (22-29; 33-36). Particularly thought-provoking are the issues related to the digital transfer of consciousness onto the cloud and the examination of the very quality of the potential brain emulation (175-6). In short, Sorgner does not reject radical transhumanist interventions into a human substrate, such as cryonics, mind-uploading, or other potential immortality-led scenarios. Nevertheless, he examines them critically (with a particular mood for the justified deconstruction of *immortality* as a conceptually ungraspable feature in naturalist zoe-schemes – p. 27, et sim.) and, as noted above, opts for more foci on relatively-short-term agendas engaged in flattening the curve of the 'human predicament', such as gene and cyborg tech for instance:

"Gene technologies cover the wide range of options from gene editing via gene analysis to selecting fertilized eggs after IVF* and PGD** (...) Cyborg technologies have to do with the digitalization of the lifeworld, smart cities, the Internet of Things, and the upgrading of human beings by means of RFID chips (23)."

Furthermore, Sorgner investigates the benefits of taking advantage of Big Data collection procedures. This analysis field spreads from the problematization of geopolitical competition and data availability/social beneficence ratio towards a more focused examination of medical issues (e. g., Big Gene Data). However, the author is well aware of both gains and potential flaws of such an approach, especially regarding the controversies around personalized data access and imagined neutrality of controlling instances. In a word, while offering the idea of algorithms being the master controllers of data flow, he openly advocates isolating Big Data from the reach of the 'Big Other'. Besides, these and similar developments are followed by almost complete digitization of our lifeworlds and the consequent migration of ever-smaller computers into our bodies, blurring out all the liminal *topoi* between embodied subject and technology, if such a duality ever existed in a rough sense. These trends pose new questions on a global scale regarding Internet panopticon, systems of tracking, etc., and in times of COVID-19 pandemic have become more actual than ever before (53).

The discussion culminates with [4] *A Fictive Ethics*, thematically speaking probably the richest session in the book. At this stage, it is shown *in extenso* how the author's proposal of the most plausible ethical approaches within the transhumanist project unfolds and subsequently deals with the loudest controversies set around it. Here, Sorgner focuses on certain Nietzschean takes on communitarianism, will-to-power anthropology, and masterly virtue of truthfulness engraved upon the flows of historical forces – as an active platform for the *overhuman* to crop up on the planetary horizon (112 et sim.). Sorgner's methodology here is twofold by his own admission: being in constant critical dialogue with Nietzsche, he extracts and updates only partial aspects of Nietzschean thinking (113). Moreover, he develops them further, not to make them fit into his frame of reference but to boost them with more vitality to face what arose in the meantime and needs to be addressed promptly. Along the lines of this process, Sorgner problematizes

Michael Sandel's rejection of gene tech based on his theory of virtue and his specific understanding of unconditional love as a formative feature of parenthood. By employing Nietzschean evolutionary and naturalistic world coding (somewhat contrasted to Darwin and sketched out in his conceptualization of truthfulness), Sorgner opens up the possibility for genetic enhancement to be referred to as a morally unproblematic take and not as a merciless choice of vicious parents. The latter is especially present in Sandel's critique of "the option of selecting a fertilized egg after IVF and PGD" (128-9). What follows is the crescendo offered in the new prolegomenon for a metahumanist personology and a radical pluralist account, bringing forward a genuine manifesto for the onto-democracy of goodness (166-7).

On a final note, this book should be read as it was written: meticulously. Sorgner's research scope requires no less than active participants with open-ended potentials to read our inherited conceptual schemes critically. The language is direct and provocative, in the best etymological context of the term (*pro-vocare*, i.e., to call forth the agency brought by the e-*motional* input). It has been designed to be grappled with, far from being suitable for a cheap agreeance. To be clear, particular insights from this book taken out of context could be considered a nuclear weapon boomeranged against the author. Think just of the lines considering the legality of incest, chipping humans as a norm, total surveillance as an embraceable paradigm that, in fact, does not abolish freedom (52-55), etc. – and all this in times of epic planetary anxiety and wild YouTube reactionism. However, this strategy is intentional and experimental and operates only within re-engineered onto-ethical premises the author previously offers as mental nourishment while drawing his unorthodox socio-political maps. Thus, Sorgner thwarts unthoughtful criticism by taking at least one step forward to meet his critics. As an outcome, this monograph merits the full attention of any project-oriented thought, bringing about a refined scholarly upgrade to philosophical transhumanism.

Abbreviations

*IVF - In Vitro Fertilization

**PGD - Preimplantation genetic diagnosis

References

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