

Have We always Been Cyborgs? A Critique of Stefan Lorenz Sorgner's Latest Transhumanistic Work

Sorgner, Stefan Lorenz. 2022. *We Have Always Been Cyborgs. Digital Data, Gene Technologies, and an Ethics of Transhumanism*. Bristol University Press. 240 pages. ISBN: 978-1529219203.

BOOK REVIEW

Streaming beyond humanism, transhumanism (an abbreviation for transitional humanism) is among the most prominent manifestations of how (emerging) techno-scientific advancements have questioned predominant doctrines concerning humanity and its very condition (Belk 2021a, 2021b; Hall 2017; Sorgner 2016, 2021, 2022; Wolyniak and Harrison 2015). It emerged in the mid-20th century and has become increasingly popular particularly in the United States and Western Europe (See the works of Fuller 2017, 2019; Hansell and Grassie 2010; Huxley 1968; Kurzweil 2005; Lilly 2008; More 2009; Moravec 1988). In essence, it is an intellectual historically changing movement that aims at emancipating humans from not only their psychic and corporeal constraints (through benevolent bio/nano technological enhancement, augmentation, and intensification) but the destructive impacts of the current humanist paradigm as well, via summits of Artificial Intelligence, bringing about life forms with significantly different characteristics other than human (For more detailed accounts, see the vignettes of its prominent forerunners, namely Kurzweil, More, Hughes, Vita-More, Minsky, Drexler, Moravec, and Bostrom).

To transhumanists, technological innovation is the dawn for a new paradigm which augurs that the body and mind are "instrumental in nature" and can therefore be manipulated, tweaked, and upgraded for the sake of becoming superior successors. As Ranisch and Sorgner (2014) posit, "The result of such technologically induced version of evolution is referred to as posthuman. However, there is no commonly shared conception of what posthumans are, and visions range from the

posthuman as a new biological species, a cybernetic organism, or even a digital disembodied entity. The link between the human and the posthuman is the transhuman, an abbreviation for a transitional human, to which transhumanism owes its name" (pp. 7–8). Over the last few decades, it has become the mission of transhumanists to re-interpret what it means to be human and re-install humanist concepts; the natural outcome would be a new biological species not subject to the limits of body, finite mind, and mortality (For the now-burgeoning literature on transhumanism, see Eberl 2022; Gouw, Green and Peters 2022; Guerreiro et al. 2022; Mendz and Cook 2021).

As a phenomenon of human co-evolution with technology, transhumanism has gained much academic attention and drawn in a clutch of multifaceted distinguished transhumanist institutions, philosophers, bio-liberal ethicists, theologians, cybernetics enthusiasts, and futurists who provide the movement with diverse socio-political leverages. The palpable sense of urgency for techno-mediated meliorism coupled with the hyper-optimistic anticipation and faith in biotechnologies for the making of perfectible bodies brought about much conceptual confusion regarding the techno-progressive agenda of terrestrial existence. Several debates have recently emerged around transhumanism as a contemporary renewal of humanism with its philosophical assumptions and techno-optimist concepts and values. Despite its enduring influence and the multiple academic trajectories it closely ties with, a fully-fledged philosophy of transhumanism has not yet come to the fore. Among scholars advocating techno-

futuristic transgression of human biology and formulating a “weak transhumanist” philosophy is Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, one of the worldwide German prominent veterans on post- and trans-humanism.

Sorgner is Chair of the Department of History and Humanities at John Cabot University in Rome and Editor-in-Chief and Founding Editor of *Journal of Posthuman Studies*. Despite the distinction made between transhumanist and posthumanist conceptions of humanity propagated in most of the literature to date, Sorgner suggests that some versions of transhumanism can be “assimilated into posthumanism” and the merge of both would be metahumanism. In the many papers and volumes he recently published, he offers deep reflections and significant contributions to contemporary debates on transhumanism in this regard. The central thesis of Sorgner’s scholarship is discernible in his assiduous contributions, highly praised by several world-leading thinkers and in numerous German academic circles, namely “On Transhumanism: The most dangerous idea in the world?!” (2021) and his most recent work “We Have Always Been Cyborgs. Digital Data, Gene Technologies, and an Ethics of Transhumanism” (2022) where his informed philosophical engagement with transhumanism is all-inclusive. Despite the vast complexity of the topics Sorgner’s volume engages with from various cultural, political, philosophical, and digital prisms, the language of his books is consistently clear – a typical feature of his research works. As primers on philosophical transhumanism coupled with its conceptual correlatives, his publications walk readers through dense epochal complexities whereby his metahumanist philosophy is situated ‘beyond’ the rendered mind-body dualism.

We Have Always Been Cyborgs. Digital Data, Gene Technologies, and an Ethics of Transhumanism is indeed a ground-breaking and visionary book that explores the critical issues around transhumanism and digitalisation, gene technologies, and ethics. The book is constructed around an ongoing optimistic “process of becoming” in terms of the human evolutionary endeavors of progressive differentiation and expansive cyborgic hybridity with the ultimate aim of the optimization of life. Since the physical nature of humans is conceived by analogy with a technical system, Sorgner implies that we as humans have always been cyborgs and, therefore, never been human as well. His monograph is laid out in

five key chapters that introduce enthusiastic readers to a wide array of pertinent complex and challenging political, ethical, and ontological issues currently linked to gene technology, negative freedom, privacy, digital data collection, and immortality (through life extension, cyborgs, and uploaded minds) with incisive conclusions. Introductory in nature, the first chapter “Transhumanism: In a Nutshell” is an in-depth philosophically critical discussion of the main transhumanist agenda, its philosophical roots, the concept of goodness, and arguments concerning negative and morphological freedom and human transitionality. In collegiality with other transhumanists, Sorgner adopts a non-dualist approach and comprehensively presents such notions from a hermeneutical ethical position, all of which strategically walk avid readers through the transhumanist repertoire and help them trace and comprehend the movement. He is an advocate of technologically-assisted enhancements and life extension in the name of a greater plurality of human flourishing and aspired goodness. The second and third chapters entitled “On a Silicon-Based Transhumanism” and “On a Carbon-based Transhumanism”, respectively, tackle two distinct enhancement techniques of close relevance to digital immortality. While Chapter Two places emphasis on mind-upload and cyborgization, Chapter Three focuses on a wide range of gene technologies pivotal to the notion of transhumanism, namely: Nietzsche and the recent debates on transhumanism and eugenics, critical reflections on moral bioenhancements, gene modification, gene selection after in vitro fertilization (IVF), and pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PDG). Sorgner highlights that the proper interaction of gene and digital technologies can significantly improve the quality of life, and that it stands in a long tradition of what we as humans have always been doing.

The fourth chapter “Fictive Ethics” sums up Sorgner’s main ethical reflections on a wide array of issues, specifically: genetic editing and enhancement, cryonics, utopias, and negative freedom for the sake of a radically pluralist concept of good life. Special attention is directed to his fictive ethical stance with regard to virtue ethics, the question of good life, personhood and what is morally right, transhumanism and utopia, and transhumanism, immortality and the meaning of life. From a weak transhumanist lens, state-of-the-art intellectual exchanges on transhumanism, critical posthumanism,

and the ethics of gene technologies are critically examined with a myriad detailed, comprehensive, and compelling analyses along the transhuman spectrum. The concluding chapter entitled "The End as a New Beginning" is a three-page epilogue in which Sorgner considers current global challenges and the imminence of the Sixth Mass Extinction. He proposes a non-anthropocentric approach and a non-dualistic relational understanding of the world whereby human's relationship with technology should be developed in the name of a balanced, harmonious and healthy environment for a sustainable personal flourishing.

Given its revolutionary nature, *We Have Always Been Cyborgs* should be read with caution. The book does not explicitly propagate that the constancy and binding character of human nature is called into question. Sorgner's moderate transhumanist movement is not premised only on a posthuman age but is dedicated to all variants of optimizing human nature that could be achieved with biotechnological means in the near future. What he lays out in the early chapter with a "nihilistic, positive pessimism" (Sorgner 2022, 1) resonates with the common consensus among transhumanists that bodily existence and its inevitable imperfectability is becoming less acceptable and is becoming increasingly restrictive of human freedom, on the one hand, and with the rapid advancement of today's digital body-hacking measures, specialized self-tracking biometric devices, or cognitive enhancers, on the other (for more on self-tracking, see the works of Lupton 2012, 2013, 2015; Morozov 2013). In both scenarios, humans are beings capable of taking stances toward the cultivation of a good life, recently developing instrumental relationships with their corporeality and self-reification, which is a sine qua non of the quantified self communities we are becoming.

Augmenting human bodies technologically is not a new endeavor, but how transhumanists introduce the notion indeed is. Despite the fact that many scholars support Sorgner's vehement urgings, I argue that the emphasis on body modification in Chapters Two and Three is ultimately an additional manifestation of the advanced capitalist logic and inherent elitism (Elyamany 2021; Tyner 2022). What Sorgner sketches in his monograph aligns with the "multi-dimensional, socio-cultural and technological themes pertinent to the predominance of

international corporate conglomerates and the creation of hyper-real places and simulacra with an acute sense of postmodern global malaise" (Elyamany 2021, 5). The transhumanist agenda is far beyond affording more "rights" to humans; it is a vehicle for empowering the financial elites to control thoughts and turn humans into slaves (as recently discussed in the Netflix docu-drama *The Social Dilemma* (2020) and the nurturing technology addiction through surveillance capitalism and data mining, for the sake of political polarization, mass manipulation, and financial gains).

Transhumanism is an incarnation of digital fascism that reproduces more divides (adding up to the list of segregatory measures permeating the world), more inequalities, expulsions, and concentrations. How about the consequential illicit human experiments, namely brain technological implants? This inherently means that: "Power is exercised not only through preeminent android technologies but also through the very cyborgs who have become mere objects of control in surveillant capitalist and technocratic communities" (Elyamany 2021, 4). This being said, the transhumanist ideology, in all its transcendental glory, is fueled by factions of millionaire elites within (post)capitalist states and mighty corporations (with Bill Gates and Elon Musk potentially two of them) that aspire to digitalize citizens through technological implants who will be digital slaves at the service of an oligarchy and the "ubiquitous invasive forms of surveillance and social control employed by officials in authority positions" (Elyamany 2022a, 172). The unprecedented changes discussed by Sorgner can therefore result in irreversible change of life beyond recognition as postulated by Peters (2015). In tandem, the plurality of transhumanist futures is striking without necessarily invoking the imminent Anthropocene.

As I recently reiterated, "Posthuman innovations signal metamorphic changes to the representations of lived experience and, therefore, pose a daunting existential challenge in a world where the human race is usurped by its own artificial progeny. The enhanced non-human beings, if endowed with limitless life spans, can be individuals of unlimited vigor, cognitive power and can presumably eventually transcend the fragilities and biological limitations of the present human form. The deployment of unbridled disruptive technologies of techno-capitalism is indeed a fearful feat if taken as

legitimate and if not wisely manipulated” (Elyamany 2022b, 24).

On a different note, I see the compelling notion of reaching “substrate independence” and the “upload of consciousness” into a cybernetic environment (expecting the advent of Singularity) is a far-out venture and a mere escapism. Although Sorgner does not overtly articulate it, he advocates full digital embodiment in which the human form is completely substituted by an alternative carbon substrate while the consciousness is uploaded within a cyberspatial realm and the flesh and outwardly obstacles are fundamentally non-existent.

To him, as well as to other contemporary transhumanists, this form of transhumanism is materially indestructible in that the subject is absolutely disembodied; the upgraded human would be able to live forever, totally unmitigated by the prospect of death. Packaged as the promise of a universal uplift for humanity, his utopian mind-upload readily underlies reliance on biotechnologies for the detachment from the biological organism and the construction of a software model faithful to the original scanned brain, that is, the synthetic conversion of human. But the transhumanist aspiration of transcending the human condition is only a reality in sci-fi films! Mind transfer and immortality are among the themes of several Netflix’s series namely *Altered Carbon* (2018) and a plethora of postcyberpunk films, with *Blade Runner 2049* on top. If these operations of technicity can be performed with unweighted ease, and if they claim their viability, why have any of these transhumanists not undergone such organic transformations and uploaded their minds to other substrates to attain virtual immortality and freedom of manipulation? The human mind is far from being a mere set of digitizable algorithms. Humans are neither pure machines nor pure minds; the mind and body are inseparable and there is a dialectic relationship between both. Conscious experiences cannot be represented in terms of synergetic data sets, nor can they be simulated, copied, or transferred in the form of digital records.

More troublesome about *We Have Always Been Cyborgs* is that Sorgner does not engage with the critiques of the controversial movement of technological human enhancement (be it the “trans-humans” (H+) or “post-humans” (H++)). The movement and the

underlying techno-optimism (and potential to sanctify the human genome, draw continuity and disjoint time, and become a new eugenic) have faced criticisms regarding goodness, modal robustness, processes of (bio)technicization of mental and physical existence, human-machine hybridization, and prosthetic existence (Bialecki 2022; Godde 2022). The emergence of artificial life (i.e. silicon-based digital beings), the re-engineering of life for human augmentation, the changing notion of immortality as a faith-based venture, the transcendence of the flesh, and the endeavors to create a totalitarian society will continue to receive criticism. Albeit eye-opening and thought-provoking, the book ignores the body of studies opposing his arguments and the transhumanist dialogues and tenets therein. I reckon that Sorgner’s next academic contribution shall be geared toward the contending voices, fending off the critiques that impugn his convictions (as well as other transhumanists’).

To conclude, transhumanism encompasses a wide array of ideological schisms at metaphysical, psychological, and ethical levels and its pertinent notions of turning humanity to spaces open to intervention and rationalization unequivocally open up new venues for the perfection of human beings. Its advocates postulate that, with extreme technological emancipatory projects and measures, human beings can self-optimize and live for aeons. Human extension technologies for better “healthspans” range from the consumption of radical dietary supplements to the reliance on prosthetic limbs and the merge with bio/nano technologies to generate a modality of existence superior to the present human condition. But we as humans are complex beings and systems, never omnipotent (or nearly omnipotent) beings, and far greater than the sum of our parts or being ‘engineerable’ (as introduced in *Blade Runner 2049*) and metamorphosing into unbound all-powerful beings is a direct threat to mankind and imminent annihilation.

Despite my critique of Sorgner’s monograph, the key contribution of his latest volume is the compelling vision put forward for the future realization of transhumanism in the age of Artificial Intelligence. His knowledge of the continental and utilitarian traditions of moral philosophy underline the fact that this book is a very informative and fascinating read. *We Have Always Been Cyborgs* not only offers a clear introduction to transhumanism but also

provides an opportunity to consider the moral questions lying at the center of public debate (and bioethics). In a biotech age that affords (imminent) unprecedented and inescapable means to another developmental echelon to remake human biology, the book offers insightful reflections on future existential risks and benefits and is definitely an important guide for readers interested in transhumanist and posthumanist projects, values, and views.

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