

Übermensch: Plädoyer für einen Nietzscheanischen Transhumanismus

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With this book, *Overhuman: A Plea for a Nietzschean Transhumanism*, Stefan Lorenz Sorgner opens up another chapter in the debate on Nietzsche's relationship to transhumanism. The debate began in the issues of *Journal of Evolution & Technology* from 2009 to 2010 and moved on to *The Agonist* in its Fall 2011 issue, and then these two debates had come together along with new articles by Nietzsche scholars in an anthology, *Nietzsche and Transhumanism* (edited by the reviewer). In this book, Sorgner covers new territories, addresses new issues, and furthers his case for establishing a connection between transhumanism and Nietzsche's thought. The book consists of twelve chapters. What follows below is a review of every chapter (all chapter heading translations are mine and page numbers are references to the German edition of the book under review here):

In the first chapter, "Immortality vs. the Spirit of Anti-Utopia," Sorgner questions the dominant positions on immortality, religious or otherwise, and invites his readers to consider the many meanings 'immortality' can have. Despite all the different meanings, Sorgner asks, whose life can extend fur-

ther than the universe, the entire creation itself? In all likelihood, humans are 'condemned' to mortality. To think otherwise is utopic and Sorgner shows how the many transhumanist thinkers represent problematic forms of utopia (15). He also underlies the contrast between transhumanists who view human mortality from different angles, who do not set immortality as a goal to attain, and people who have deep beliefs in death-related issues such as immortality of the soul; in other words, some transhumanists have different non-utopic positions on the subject of immortality, which could be alternative to the ordinary beliefs and transhumanistic utopias. Many do not even think about such issues when they can enjoy the pleasures of life. Humans are not stuck only between two options, between the anxiety of survival and boredom, contra Schopenhauer. Sorgner further examines common notions of health, disease, and aging and emphasizes how differently humans experience all of these aspects of life and how futile it is to project our own experiences on others, while it is an existential fact that we are all singularly different. As Sorgner warns against dangerous rhetoric regarding immortality—history is full of such rhetoric especially in the hands of clergy and political leaders—he calls for a non-utopic version of transhumanism, which steers away from dogmas and embraces the well-being of all persons (20).

"Aging as Disease," the second chapter of the book, discusses the issue of aging, as it engages with the transhumanist position that considers aging to be a disease, as represented by Aubrey de Grey. De Grey analyses aging in seven processes some of which explain common old age diseases such as cancer, Alzheimer and Parkinson's, finds the challenge to be in the "disease" of aging and believes that human life span can be extended, if this challenge is to be dealt with. As Sorgner indicates, average life expectancy is already doubled in Europe in the last 150 years. He links further this recent technology of life extension to the human evolution. A species adapts to changes or dies out. To constantly develop new technologies to fit with species evolution is the decisive assumption that all transhumanists share, according to Sorgner.

The following chapter, "Human Potential," presents scientific studies and experiments in human-animal hybrids. Through these experiments, scien-

tists are aiming to transfer life-prolonging and body-regenerating capabilities of animals on to humans. There are animals, as Sorgner lists, that live longer than humans. In this context Sorgner mentions new technologies such as CRISPR and Big Data Gene Analysis through which human life span can be extended. The former helps repair the defective gene and the latter with the identification of life-prolonging genes.

“Making Health Span Longer as Important or Therapy?” follows the previous chapter. Here, Sorgner examines the ethical dilemmas in life span arguments, as he engages with bio-conservative positions such as that of Habermas and considers the ban on instrumentalization, which dictates, based on Kantian ethics, that human-beings should not be used as means to an end. Sorgner exposes the inconsistencies and double standards in Habermas’ position which he likens to that of the Catholic Church, in which a fertilized egg can be considered to be a person, while an adult chimpanzee can be treated like a thing. Next he explores the issue of life span in relation to quality of life and the ethics of suicide in cases of illness. He attempts to laybare the problems that underlie particular paternalistic assumptions in arguments against suicide when it is a matter of suffering and the end of that suffering. Here he brings up the distinction between life span and health span and states that the latter would be associated with the improvement of quality of life. He then moves on to a discussion of illness, as he considers “functional-objective” vs. “subjective” positions. The former limits all beings to their immediate use and function, while the latter takes into account human individuality and diversity in needs, desires, and so on. In this context, Sorgner also examines the rigid separation Habermas establishes between therapy and enhancement, while insisting that there is only a thin line that separates the two. He then comes back to the fundamental question regarding the moral reevaluation of aging. The chapter ends with a survey of recent technologies on aging such as Telomer, Big Data for Gene Analysis, RFID chips, and other digital technologies.

The next chapter is entitled “Challenge-Overpopulation” and addresses the problem of over-population in the face of limited resources. How does

individual well-being fit with the common good? Should the individual happiness be sacrificed for the larger good? Sorgner warns his readers against the dangers of such positions, often discussed and presented in different forms in Western philosophy since the ancient Greeks. He also brings Utilitarianism into discussion and argues that humans should not be prevented from living long lives simply because of the problem of overpopulation. After mentioning a biotechnology, which aims to keep human population under the limit of 10 billion with the help of a virus,¹ Sorgner moves on to the discussion of freedom, another hotly debated topic in modern and post-modern thought. For him, the crux of the matter lies in the “*Errungenschaft der Freiheit*” (42), that is to say, how we realize and actualize our freedoms. He then offers ways to deal with the problem of overpopulation such as expanding living spaces in water and new forms of production of goods to meet the rising demands. Education is also another way to take on the challenge. In addition, Sorgner mentions some other technologies, emerging technologies, including inhabiting other planets like Mars, which now may look like a fantasy but may come true in the near or far future, as technology innovators make the way. This chapter ends on a positive note on emerging technologies and how bright the future looks.

In the following chapter, “Between Renaissance Genius and the Radical Plurality of Human Perfection,” Sorgner starts by regretting the under- or mis-representation of transhumanism in some circles. He then moves on to presenting some parallels between transhumanism and Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* by way of the ideal of perfection. After all, both seek qualities of perfection, despite the fact that the small joys of life belong to the lesser type, the last human, in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, as Sorgner observes (49). He identifies these qualities, to name some of them, as physical and mental health, super-intelligence, strong memory, and empathy capability, all of which he claims could necessary for everyone’s good life. However, Sorgner

¹In this context Sorgner refers to Dan Brown’s book, *Inferno*, and its protagonist, Dr. Zobrist, who takes on the challenge of overpopulation.

recognizes that these qualities do not have universal validity. Although they may be necessary for the good life, this is not say that they are all needed equally by everyone. Here we must not forget that Nietzsche's 'Übermensch' is not only about seeking perfection, but also how one can overcome one's weaknesses by using one's internal resources (not only through technological means). Sorgner continues his discussion on the interesting topic of the good life and how it can account for our diverse needs, desires, and affects. He recognizes the challenges for those who do not fit or do not want to follow the dominant life styles of their culture. Next Sorgner discusses the radical plurality of the good in relation to what can be called "negative freedom." Humans should be stopped from harming others for the sake of their own good. Here comes the importance of limits and the realization of freedoms. I must also add in passing that there are many good passages in this chapter on the uniqueness of each individual and how incommunicable we are to each other (54-55). The last pages of this chapter address another controversial topic: parents' responsibility towards their children and the kinds of permissible interventions they can do for them. Of course, here too the limits and the realization of freedoms come to the foreground. What are those parental interventions that are acceptable, and more concretely, that would be accepted by those children when they become adults?

Radical plurality, freedom, and politics are the subject-matters of the next chapter, "Burning Man, Techno Hippies and Rainbow Politics." Here Sorgner shows how the plurality of human existence is not recognized in repressive, paternalistic societies, but can be accepted and promoted in societies and states where freedoms are cherished. In this context Sorgner brings up the significance of entertaining the idea of negative and positive freedoms, exposes related themes such as solidarity and equality, and touches upon the socio-cultural and economic conditions of freedom. After discussing the Silicon Valley, its associations with the Burning Man Festival and its context in capitalism, he reiterates his position on how we can re-create our world-order through radical inclusion, radical plurality and a new understanding of freedom in the age of digital technology.

How do we live in the age of Internet-Panopticon? This is the main topic of the following chapter, "The Panopticon-Internet and the Dissolution of Privacy." After exposing what the Panopticon is by way of Greek mythology, Bentham and Foucault, Sorgner presents the dilemmas of the digital age and the internet. In the Panopticon, we can all be guardians and prisoners at the same time. All information about anyone, whether it is spatial, 'psychic' or 'physical', can be accessed by others. Since we cannot and do not want to un-do the internet, what can be done to minimize the loss of privacy? This is the question Sorgner poses and one solution he offers is to structure the cultural environment; more specifically he proposes anonymity and chaos on the net. For the former he mentions a software called 'Tor.' In the rest of the chapter he discusses what privacy is, why we are so concerned with it, and its significance in the digital age. As Sorgner claims, the guards are as vulnerable as the prisoners in the world of the Panopticon-Internet. The realization of the political norm of freedom and the contextualization of negative freedom navigate the good life of citizens who are not arbitrarily persecuted. Sorgner, however, does not go all the way with the Foucauldian critique of libertarian societies where citizens become subjects to normalization in different ways under disciplinary regimes and institutions, also often under the name of freedom.

The following chapter, "Deceleration through Acceleration," describes the modern life, its ups and downs, monotony and stressfulness, while showing the projectile of technological progress, the benefits it has brought from refrigerators to cell phones and the extension of life span, all roughly in the last two centuries. Many of the points Sorgner makes here are common sensical; however, thinkers must be wary of the negative effects of technology and today's technological being-in-the-world, without necessarily demonizing it or "complaining about technological progress" (80). An in-between position is possible, even if it is not held by many. Within the context of this progress, Sorgner does mention one problem, namely, the rise of unemployment due to automated systems. There are, however, many problems in the technological world; for one thing, all the benefits and longevity he speaks of

are not shared by all human-beings, but rather by a small percentage of the world population. This and other problems cannot be underestimated.

In “The Tea Ceremony and Pharmacologically Enhanced Mindfulness” Sorgner revisits the subject of acceleration vs. deceleration by way of a tea ceremony he experienced in Taiwan. Speaking of mystical experiences and intoxication, he brings up mindfulness and how it changes our world perception and intensifies our own self-understanding (87) and how embedded we are in our natural environment in terms of nutrition, climate, and place, a point that was also observed by Nietzsche (88). Sorgner then continues his discussion on spirit (*Geist*) and reason (*Vernunft*); neither spirit nor reason is an isolated phenomenon, but rather must be understood in their historic, material, and evolutionary contexts. With all of this discussion, I think he is trying to search for religious experiences, which are typically decelerated, in the accelerated world of technology. To that end, towards the end of the chapter he makes three suggestions (paraphrased here): 1) enhancement of radical mindfulness with the means of relevant drugs; 2) acceleration through raising human achievement capabilities with the means of many enhancement technologies; and 3) increase of automation and use of artificial intelligence in complex arenas of human activity. Through the means of acceleration, Sorgner can envision a decelerated future (89).

The following chapter, “Nihilism as Accomplishment,” revisits Nietzsche’s ideas on the subject of nihilism. Sorgner disagrees with Nietzsche’s call for overcoming nihilism since such overcomings could lead to new paternalistic regimes or structures. To explain his position, a position he had presented before in his *Metaphysics without Truth*, he splits nihilism into two: alethic and ethical; the former has to do with truth and the latter with morality. Sorgner connects alethic nihilism to truth claims or judgments and every judgment is an interpretation. This is not to say that it is false simply because it is an interpretation or does not mean that the judgment in question is a self-contradictory one. Alethic nihilism stems from the possibility of such truth claims and this relates to languages and linguistic structures. In this sense, Sorgner finds nihilism somewhat built in the nature of languages.

Out of these and other reasons as stated, Sorgner affirms this type of nihilism. As for the ethical nihilism, Sorgner brings up the larger context of values and norms and highlights the value of freedom. If we do not keep the broader context in mind, there is always the danger of not considering the freedoms of others and ending up in other paternalistic systems. It is for this reason that he brings up “negative freedom” as a norm, which could balance out those problematic developments that can bury freedoms.

In the last chapter of the book, “Nietzsche’s Übermensch: Sloterdijk, Habermas and Transhumanism,” Sorgner revisits the debate between these two leading intellectual figures of today’s Germany. Although Sloterdijk is a bioconservative like Habermas, the latter reacted to the former’s talk “Rules for the Human Zoo” which he had given in 1999. According to Sorgner, this was a rhetorical move on the part of Habermas: first, he mistook Sloterdijk for a transhumanist when he has no connection to transhumanism. Second, Habermas used this talk as another chance to attack eugenics and all genetic engineering, a sensitive topic in post-war Germany. In this way, Habermas aimed to discredit transhumanism, as he juxtaposed its promotion of genetic enhancement with breeding fantasies. But, for Sorgner, Habermas does not have the last word. We either develop further, as Nietzsche’s philosophy of Übermensch calls for, or we die out. To develop further and transform ourselves, we need new technologies.

Übermensch is a thought-provoking continuation of the debate on Nietzsche and transhumanism. It makes many bold claims, engages with Nietzsche’s ideas and those of contemporary thinkers in the light of emerging technologies with a concern for the current state of affairs of our planet. It is clear that many thinkers believe that humanity is faced with a crisis. Many intellectual ring alarm bells, adding to the chorus of apocalyptic prophecies. Sorgner, on the other hand, moves along the dangerous path of thinking with an optimism, with a faith in new technologies which, he believes, can conjoin education, enhancement and therapy, all of which are embodied in Nietzsche’s conception of the *Übermensch*. I recommend the book highly for anyone who is interested in carrying on the debate.