

BOOK REVIEW

Sorgner, S. L. (2020). *On Transhumanism: The most dangerous idea in the world?! (S. Hawkins, Trans.)*. Pennsylvania State Univ Press. 160 pages, 73,62 EUR. ISBN: 978-0-271-08792-4.

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This hot-off-the-press publication *On Transhumanism* by Stefan Lorenz Sorgner operates as a precise navigation tool through dense epochal complexities in which the long-established notion of human as an exclusive onto-epistemic benchmark gets thoroughly re-examined. The book offers a wide range of autonomous socio-philosophical conceptual and ethical takes on the contemporary issues drawn from the transhumanist repertoire, some of which are considered quite contentious. This is a book on philosophical Transhumanism and its conceptual correlatives, Posthumanism and Humanism, displayed in high variety of their multiple arrangements. It is written from the perspective of a sui generis metahumanist reasoning, a position that provides an in(ter)dependent horizon that neither uncritically celebrates the most controversial transhumanist ideas nor simply rejects them on the basis of mere neophobia and/or indisputable conservative morality.

Despite the vast complexity of the topics it engages with, the language of the book remains clear, consistent and deliberately devoid of any mannerism. The English translation of the original 2016 edition published in German preserves the analytical sharpness and keeps the general spirit of the book virtually intact. A pretaste of certain subtle lexical aporias displayed in Spencer Hawkins' preface maps the translation strategies and intervenes with a vivid theoretical approach which keeps pace with Sorgner's demanding conceptual framing, making it easier for North American reader to unpack. Some of the best insights derived from his translatosophical lines are the ones where an enhanced, self-proclaimed "cyborg-translator" Hawkins, without expressing it explicitly, unequivocally opts for Sorgner's meticulous brand of "weak Transhumanism" in praxi (Preface, xxvii).

Sorgner's opening lines, as well as the book's kick-off chapter, are mostly set around a balanced and knowledgeable approach towards various facets of Transhumanism, which could be marked with a strategic oxymoron of 'critical apology'. This assessment requires a slight contextualization. Namely, to critique transhumanist positions in a radical fashion does not seem to be the most solitary 'playing-it-safe' job on Earth. Thus, Francis Fukuyama, a repentant copywriter of the notorious "end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992), assigned it the label of the world's "most dangerous idea" (Fukuyama, 2004), referring to its tempting biotech offerings that are, according to this author's reasoning, steeper for ethical losses than for

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ontological gains. Jürgen Habermas goes even further in an implicit dialogue with Peter Sloterdijk (whom he, as Sorgner clearly shows, inaccurately identifies as a transhumanist). At one point, he even denotes Transhumanism as a crypto-religious pattern with “the worldview of a cult” (Habermas, 2014). In addition, the so-called critical-posthumanist camp detects an ‘amplified’ neo-Kantian, Enlightenment-driven sentiment in transhumanist agendas, thus pointing to an even more accelerated sclerotization of an always-already structurally problematic episteme (Braidotti, 2018). Moreover, it is said to be a tendency towards human enhancement without a sense of problematizing the inherent status of ‘human’ as an ever-exclusivist paradigm, which, in this perspective, proved to be devastating for both the species itself and the entire planet.

On the other hand, Sorgner’s cautiously treated goal is to set the stage for an effective discussion on Transhumanism while keeping a multi-perspectivist approach that does not hastily exclude the scholarly relevant critical points being made recently—although he finds the latter assertions on “hyperhumanism” rather inadequate (74). Besides, he is well aware that the media hyped up the movement to the point of selling some of Silicon Valley’s wildest dreams as its programmatic core, making it sound as if they laid just around the corner (Sorgner, 2021). To be sure, this monograph does not entirely discredit a pursuit for biological immortality (by treating aging as a disease, following Aubrey de Grey, for instance), or a digital one through ‘mind uploading’ procedures, advertised by some of its loudest proponents (Elon Musk, Ray Kurzweil, Zoltan Istvan, to mention but a few). Rather, Sorgner tends to bring back to the table the issues he considers to be far more realistic and urgent in the short run. For instance, philosophical and ethical problematization of the various techniques and technologies of human enhancement. In this regard, a thorough re-examination and consequent re-narrativization of Transhumanism ‘from disgust to trust’ (or from “yuck” to “yeah” factor, as suggested aphoristically), especially in times of global pandemic, fully justify his intellectual intuition: “I believe that constant self-overcoming is central to promoting my own quality of life. I also consider scientific research, especially in biotechnology, extremely important and advocate for greater sponsorship of those research fields. I consider the availability of anesthetics, vaccinations, and antibiotics important achievements. I hope that further achievements will follow to address important challenges” (14).

Moving on, the next chapter focuses on the enhancement issues in more detail, pointing out certain topics that lie at the heart of current bioethical debates. These are ranging from the boost of emotional, physiological and intellectual capacities to the questions of morality enhancement. As a strong advocate of the concept of negative freedom (seen as “the absence of constraint”), the author takes the latter *cum grano salis*, bearing in mind certain totalitarian tendencies this direction of thinking could potentially induce (22; 29). Sorgner then follows the discussion flow contemplating on genetic enhancement as a re-vamped term of liberal eugenics (19), pharmaco-enhancement as a part of neuroethical department, and the cyborg-enhancement as a (non)digital intrusion into the organic. These terms open a plethora of questions regarding the traditional notion of personhood and the boulder-blurring challenges set around it. Particularly interesting are the lines on morpho-therapy, in which the author indicates that even facial aesthetics is not deprived from the elements of ‘soft power’—e.g., the high popularity of beauty operations in South Korea to get a ‘more European’ look (21).

A pivotal aspect of the book’s medial chapter is based on a multifaceted delineation between Post-, Trans- and Metahumanism as experimental fields of analysis. These domains have come



a long way of deterritorializing certain basic propositions stemming from specific strands of humanist thought. Specifically, the notion of human as the ‘crown of creation’, or a substance dualism, are historico-philosophically and culturally situated within this study, including an exploration of the wide range of implications their alternative modes could foster. In this sense, Metahumanism as Sorgner’s original contribution to the contemporary profile of Posthuman studies (Sorgner; del Val, 2011) proves to be a critical ‘merge’ of Trans- and Posthumanism, with a radical triple ‘excess’ of rationality, perspectivism and negative freedom. It is the ‘enhanced’ platform of freedom the author has in mind, with a non-formal conception of good, bringing about infinite personal plurality of choices as the new global ethical unit, limited only by refraining from radical harm inflicted upon other living being (Sorgner, 2020). This excessive strategy then paradoxically leads to a ‘constitutive lack’, or, following Gianni Vattimo’s philosophical project of “weak thought” – *il pensiero debole* (Vattimo, 2012), towards the consequential weakening of both trans- and posthumanist positions, rejecting decisively any paternalistic hint of fundamental ontologizing of concepts developed within mentioned fields (53-54).

The fourth part, however, is reserved for Sorgner’s assessment of Nietzschean philosophical legacy, and especially his understanding of *Übermensch* as a potential resource for the transhumanist project. Outlining a fruitful 2009/10 debate on the topic including renowned transhumanists Nick Bostrom and Max More among others, Sorgner rejects Bostrom’s remark that Transhumanism shares only “surface-level similarities with the Nietzschean vision” (Bostrom, 2005), suggesting tighter conceptual connections that could be extrapolated from Nietzsche’s derivations. Such view implies a careful reconsideration of certain components of his opus, such as “overhuman”, transitionality (understood as a constant urge for self-transcendence), will-to-power and a vision of science-oriented future, which all may sketch a rather convincing facial composite of the ‘Posthuman’ as an emerging protagonist of post-Christian techno-scientific eschatologies.

In the concluding chapter, the author wraps up his scientific credo with the “twelve pillars of Transhumanism”, taking up bioliberal stance in delivering “crucial revisions of moral criteria and ontological assessments” (92). There are plenty of issues at stake here, ranging from the arguments pro preimplantation genetic diagnosis and genetic modifications “as future variations on upbringing”, towards questions about the legal status of human-animal hybrids. The paradigm-shift marked as metasex—“pluralization of sexual relations and the associated dissolution of a binary sexuality” (99)—follows as a conceptual prelude to the occurrence of three-parent-fertilization, including the possibility for lesbian couples to have their own offspring, a discussion of the legitimacy of incestuous relationships, et sim. While these and similar ideas will remain a thorn in the side of many, they continue to serve a purpose of emphasizing the author’s persistent pleading for the radical plurality of choices and for the free realization of one’s own interpretation of goodness at whatever the cost.

As for the final impression, this book is not written with an intention to appeal nor to work as a missionary guide or a manual. Rather, Prof. Sorgner crafted a well-rounded, provocative philosophy piece that tends to challenge the established opinions on human boundaries and perspectives, by teaching and simultaneously allowing to be taught (that is, *enhanced*), which makes it a rare find and a noteworthy event within (not only) posthuman scholarship.

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