Journal of Posthumanism
February 2023
Volume: 3, No: 1, pp. 75–79
ISSN: 2634-3576 (Print) | ISSN 2634-3584 (Online)
journals.tplondon.com/jp

TRANSNATIONAL PRESS® LONDON

Received: 14 November 2022 Accepted: 18 November 2022
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33182/joph.v3i1.2881

BOOK REVIEW

Sorgner, S. L. (2021). We have always been cyborgs: digital data, gene technologies, and an ethics of transhumanism.

Ioanna - Maria Stamati[1]

Stefan Lorenz Sorgner's monograph, *We Have Always Been Cyborgs: Digital Data, Gene Technologies, and an Ethics of Transhumanism,* aims to explain the most significant present issues and prospects within the field of transhumanism, including genetic and cyborg technologies, gene ethics, mind uploading, policymaking, alongside interrogating the image and identity of the transhuman community. Usefully, its opening chapter 'Transhumanism: In a Nutshell' positions transhumanism within a historical lens, facilitating the explication of the field since its beginning proper in 1951, through its various outgrowths in the second half of the twentieth century, and thereafter, through its recent formulations by academics.

After introducing gene technologies and centering the concern of health, Sorgner returns to the term cyborg, and its roots in the Ancient Greek language. As he emphasises, the "term 'cyborg' means cybernetic organism. The word *cyber* comes from the Ancient Greek κυβερνήτης, which means helmsman or pilot. So, a cyborg is a governed, a steered organism" (9). It is crucial here that the analogical term pilot denotes someone who is in control. Whereas the monograph emphasises cyborgs as both controlled and controlling subjects, Sorgner's own conceptualisation of the cyborg is as a non-binary term to highlight the different narratives and multiplicities of each individual of this world. In his own words, "Reason enables us to survive [...] Reason is not a device which generates truth for its own sake [...] in order to actualize reason, we need education [...] Our organism is directed by our educators. Hence, we are steered organisms, or in other words 'cyborgs.' We have always been 'cyborgs' since we became *Homo sapiens*" (13).

Sorgner succeeds in showcasing the transhumanist community as a complicated conglomeration of naturalists, atheists, and secularists, and through his analysis of examples of everyday life struggles and feelings, he suggests that naturalism leads to a philosophical pessimism (11-13). Furthermore, Sorgner acknowledges that some technologies which transhumanists adulate are significant contributors to anthropogenic climate change, yet nevertheless maintains a positive attitude towards the challenging and critical development of technologies that hold the solution to this problem, which some might find characteristic of techno solutionism (13-17). For Sorgner, pessimism often engenders a nihilistic worldview through which, he argues, transhumanists can understand continual becoming as a positive ethical challenge with which we each are confronted (17-21).

[1] Ioanna-Maria Stamati, Joint Postgraduate Program in Semiotics, Culture and Communication, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. E-mail: joannamarystamatis12@gmail.com.

In the monograph's second chapter, 'On A Silicon-Based Transhumanism', Sorgner repositions, the typical transhumanist telos of mind uploading as a trivial possibility, and instead advocates for the future possibilities born of gene technologies. Likewise, he engages with Bostrom's simulation hypothesis (Bostrom, 2003) (that has since been popularised by Elon Musk) only enough to dismiss its relevance to present day concerns. Rather, he argues, the simulation argument is an ideological offshoot of mind uploading philosophies, and their fixation upon the possibility of immortality. Sorgner uses this train of thought to underline the notion of immortality in a new philosophical context; thus, whilst he respectfully disagrees with mainstream transhumanist applications of the immortality ideal, he identifies that it retains value on other grounds. Specifically, he argues that the use of the word immortality in the transhumanistic field should instead hold a metaphorical meaning, focusing on the health-span and not the life-span (22-29).

Subsequently, the analysis turns towards a consideration of the role of education as a plausible means of human upgrading. Crucially, Sorgner argues, technologies keep emerging and evolving at a rate which preconditions that humans cannot remain unchanged. Hence, "Smart cities need upgraded humans [...] Computers are in the process of getting smaller and of entering our bodies so that we turn into upgraded humans" (30). Does this assertion indicate that purely via the implantation of technologies into our bodies, we become cyborgs? Sorgner points out that the first upgrade of all humans after birth is language acquisition, after which our "cyborgization continues with the acquisition of new skills, such as learning mathematics, history, and so on" (32). New skills may upgrade the cyborg within forms of technology, but every technology has or provides hard limits. The upgrading of humans towards becoming cyborgs thus rests upon culturally constructed notions of what comprises technology.

The forty pages of this second chapter are well spent, successively emphasising the importance of data collection, and playing upon the hidden meanings of the phrase 'information is power' whilst exploring the threat of such power to European nation states. Furthermore, Sorgner here reintroduces key terms from other of his philosophical works, such as the 'internet panopticon' (37) and 'negative freedom' (44) to explore transhuman ethics, and debate privacy concerns around algorithmic surveillance. The monograph's principal contention, however, is that upgraded humans "have the appropriate means for dealing with ageing, the worst mass murderer in the world" (30); for instance, "the constant monitoring of one's own body could be decisive for readiness to combat ageing-related processes" (32).

Hence, Sorgner suggests that the collection of personalised data from individuals is not simply dystopian, but rather, can help promote human flourishing. The internet panopticon hence figures large in his philosophy as a medium capable of collecting personalised data, and gradually, engendering negative freedom. Along these lines, an algorithm collecting the personal data of individuals can be a massive violation of privacy, but at the same time can forestall dystopian scenarios based around positive freedoms. Hence, Sorgner argues that cyborgs are paradoxically both in control and controlled by others. Whilst Sorgner believes gene technologies and gene editing have many future possibilities and potential, he expresses concern about their moral legitimacy worldwide, especially when private companies have already started collecting individuals' DNA samples for analysis concerning genes and traits (63).

Relatedly, the monograph's third chapter 'On a Carbon-based Transhumanism' focuses on how to morally categorise gene technologies, starting by explicating the basic characteristics of Nietzschean thought, their influence upon the transhumanist discipline, and their antagonistic relationship with Darwin's anthropology. Here, Sorgner rehearses his familiar and famous thesis that Nietzsche

believes human beings constitute a transitional, not a final stage of development, which has by now become a truism of transhumanistic thought. As Sorgner highlights, however, many Nietzschean scholars are critical of the above reading, and criticise extensive considerations of when the human becomes the overhuman and/or a new species (Markopoulou, 2021), due to Nietzsche's critical remarks on Darwin's anthropology. Nietzsche "disagreed fundamentally with Darwin" in some respects "as he sees the will to power as the most fundamental basis of all human acts" (65). The latest applications of Nietzschean thought by transhumanists represented proposals for different goals and ways of happiness, and for revolutionary interest. For Sorgner, however, the correct way to morally accept the techniques is ethical nihilism since it involves the happiness of the diverse plurality (63-70).

The second portion of this chapter is dedicated to moral (bio)enhancement and starts with a presentation of Persson & Savulescu's perspective on the methods towards moral achievement (2012). Nevertheless, Sorgner disagrees from his pluralistic perspective for reasons pertaining to appropriation and reverse results (71-83). Next, Sorgner contests Habermas's (2003) principle that, to "be autonomous, human beings must be the sole authors of their way of life" (92) on the grounds that the choice of genetic enhancement alters the equation. He shows a structural analogy and presents a moral evaluation of genetic and educational enhancement by focusing on problematic cases of autonomous and heteronomous enhancement by modification, listing diverse issues (such as autonomy, equality, instrumentalization, therapy, etc.), that have the same extension as liberal eugenics (83-99).

The final section of this chapter is dedicated to exploring gene selection as an aspect of gene technologies. To explain the spectrum of viewpoints and the popular questions within the field, Sorgner utilises another of Savulescu's perspectives (Savulescu & Kahane, 2009) on the section of fertilized eggs after in vitro fertilisation and preimplantation genetic diagnosis and screening. Sorgner argues in favour of the principle of procreative autonomy, and thus, that people should make their own decision about the conditions of the reproductive process (99-108).

In the chapter 'A Fictive Ethics', Sorgner utilises the ethical framework developed thus far to reassess the most important ethical issues within the scope of transhuman thought. Ethics is a volatile matter in such a closed community with so many different opinions, hence he outlines the non-utilitarian, non-utopian, non-linear, non-anthropocentric, non-essentialist, and non-dualistic basis of his analysis (110). To make matters clearer, Sorgner divides the chapter into five sections. The first section expands the matter of gene modification and gene selection and recounts the form of rejection of Michael Sandel's perspective on parental virtues (2007). Sandel advocates the rejection of such technologies not from a sense of morality, but because parents who choose these methods are questioned for their parental virtues. This rejection is the first section of the chapter and has three parts for a better structural thought.

Firstly, Sorgner explains the differences between the notions of community versus society and Nietzsche's political vision, the basis of his evolutionary theory, the will to power, anthropology, and the theory of aristocratic virtues (111-119). Afterwards, Sorgner presents and questions Sandel's communitarianism as being problematic for several reasons but lays the core of the problem on its central notion of 'unconditional love' (121). For Sandel, unconditional love is acceptance of someone as they are without any modifications; I would contend that the result of such acceptance is self-improvement of the one who loves. Sorgner considers this love unfounded in the context of gene modification, since no one can say a parent does not love their child because they want to make them better in certain ways. The final aspect is to realise the spectrum of communitarianism

through the different ideas of Nietzsche and Sandel, and lastly to understand that unconditional love has harsh consequences for a child's mental health (123-129).

The second section of this chapter questions three different schools of thought concerning the transhumanistic ideal of the good life as it carries the meaning of the Renaissance ideal. For Sorgner, good life as a *telos* can be the mixture of good looks and brilliant minds. He explains a common-sense account of the good with an interesting take on people with special abilities, gesturing towards a radically pluralist concept with many Nietzschean traces. The last one is the concept Sorgner adopts and considers plausible, because it accepts the acts of sane humans even if they differ from the popular common choices, so long as doing so doesn't interfere with another's freedom (129-140). In the next section, he deals with the notion of human dignity with a focus on the legal and moral aspects within German law and consequently Kantian anthropology as the basis of it, as a study case to draw open questions of problematic acts. In this analysis, the inclusion of animals, plants, and other entities (such as objects, souls etc.) is required, but Sorgner also questions the consequences of the paradigm-shift in the daily aspects of life with the thought of culturally different moralities (141-162). It is noteworthy to refer to other works of the same concern in the same or similar scale with Sorgner's, like Ciobanu and Juhlin's "Forms of Care in Human-Nature-Technology Environments" (Ciobanu & Juhlin, 2022) or Ferrado's "Beyond Posthuman Theory: Tackling Realities of Everyday Life" (Ferrando, 2021).

The last two sections of this chapter are concerned with disavowing what Sorgner perceives as a misleading or misunderstood public and academic image of the transhumanist community. Most of the time, transhumanism is seen as an exclusionary community in the view of traditionalists and often associated with the word 'utopia' that has remained central in the community, yet which the outside world has twisted in form (162-184). 'The End as a New Beginning' is a concluding chapter which reflects on the philosophical issues the book presents, and points the need to focus on real-life challenges, practical issues, and on a naturalistic world. Here, Sorgner reiterates that his stance is grounded not in atheism or cultural conflict, but rather in an understanding of non-dualistic ideas as an essential process to usher in the paradigm-shift so one can see the posthuman or metahuman future.

This monograph provides a well-balanced perspective on transhumanism, which is refreshingly free of stereotypes. Sorgner picks authors with a straightforward perspective to delineate what transhumanism is *not*, and always promotes a positive attitude. The book contains many interesting analyses and research results on the goals of expanding the health span, and a potential answer to human extinction via the creation of human-animal hybrids. For me, particular emphasis should be given by readers to the analysis within the second chapter concerning mind-uploading and the possibility of reconsidering the term 'unconditional-love' comparing it to the meaning of 'harsh love' in Sandel's approach. Both Sandel and Sorgner raise serious questions on the matters of morality and parental virtues, yet whilst Sandel disregards the plurality and the matter of disabilities, Sorgner stresses that the largest percentage of people live in a dualistic world, and this affects the decision of the parent on the subject. Via its pluralism, this is a monograph which embodies just as much value to posthumanists as it does to the transhumanist community it discusses.

References

Bostrom, N. (2003). Are we living in a computer simulation? *The Philosophical Quarterly*, *53*(211), 243–255. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9213.00309

Ciobanu, P., & Juhlin, O. (2022). Forms of care in human–nature–technology environments. *Journal of Posthumanism*, *2*(3). https://doi.org/10.33182/joph.v2i3.1728

Ferrando, F. (2021). Beyond posthuman theory: Tackling realities of everyday life. *Journal of Posthumanism, 1*(2), 219–224. https://doi.org/10.33182/jp.v1i2.1840

Habermas, J. (2003). *The future of human nature* (Trans. H. Beister, M. Pensky, & W. Rehg). Polity Press.

Markopoulou, A. (2021). Transhumanism, Nietzsche and politics: A commentary on their relationship. *Journal of Posthumanism*, *1*(2), 229–234. https://doi.org/10.33182/jp.v1i2.1714

Persson, I. & Savulescu, J. (2012) *Unfit for the future. The need for moral enhancement*. Oxford University Press.

Sandel, M. (2007). *The case against perfection: Ethics in the age of genetic engineering* (1st ed.). The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Savulescu, J. & Kahane, G. (2009). The moral obligation to create children with the best chance of the best life. *Bioethics*, *23*(5), 274–290. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8519.2008.00687.x