BOOK REVIEW

On Trans-Humanism Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, trans. Spencer Hawkins (2020) US$30 paperback, 132pp., Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park PA, ISBN: 9780271087924

What to do with transhumanism? And – before we figure out how to categorize it, think about it and make actionable policy decisions with it – how should we define transhumanism? Stefan Lorenz Sorgner asks these questions in *On Trans-humanism* when he examines the idea's provenance and the pedigree of related ideas. This approach turns out to be, on balance, a productive and useful way into a field that does not yet examine its own roots and relationships often enough.

Spencer Hawkins's translation of Sorgner's *Transhumanismus: 'Die gefährlichste Idee der Welt'!?* begins with a translator's introduction which lays out the relevance of transhumanism in the early twenty-first century, and some of the subtleties and complications of translation from German to English. Among these are notes on choices related to cognates, and explanations of different concepts of related ideas (*anthropologie* vs anthropology; *fördern* vs enhancement, etc.). Sorgner often moves further in this direction by drawing attention to Anglo-American and European differences in the philosophical traditions from which transhumanism and posthumanism arise. These moves reinforce the best aspects of this work, which is to define and categorize transhumanism, posthumans, posthumanism, humanism and metahumanism.

Definitions abound, and sometimes sit in tension with each other. Drawing on Nick Bostrom and F.M. Esfandiary (who was to take the name FM-2030),[1] Sorgner defines transhumanism as an intermediate form between the human and the posthuman, and also defines a transhuman as one who 'has already attained qualities that go beyond the usual concept of the human and has the potential to initiate the evolutionary step toward a new species' (p.55). The relationship between transhumanism and posthumanity is one of ready confusion, because there are at least two senses of 'posthuman'. One comes from the largely American transhumanist project, and identifies some posthuman state emerging from the assertive, intentional and auto-evolutionary moves to integrate enhancement technologies into the lives of the willing and able (p.34). The second sense of posthuman has to do with posthumanism – the observation that we should move and are moving beyond a human-centered view of the world. Posthumanists, recognizing the existential threat of the anthropocene to life as we know it, ask us to reconfigure our humanistic inheritance in any number of ways. This sometimes takes the form of an argument that we should join with (or at least recognize our deep interdependence with) animals, machines, ecosystems and spirits. Actor-network theory was a forerunner here, a project that imagined all systems to be social systems, and all things in a network to be social agents, more or less equivalent to humans in their agency within the network (see the helpful discussion of 'things' in Bogost, 2012). A general toolkit for analysis of networks in which humans are not central would benefit this text and transhuman discourse more widely, but we have no attempt in this direction here.

Sorgner intends and accomplishes more than suggesting that we de-conflate the posthuman (though he takes no action on his own suggestion), but he works beholden to clear biases. Although acknowledging various versions of humanism, the version he continually returns to is one that is inescapably dualistic. In this he may sometimes come close to constructing a strawman humanism, which is hopelessly Cartesian, chained down by scholasticism and Platonism, always divided between the material demands here on the mid-links of the Great Chain of Being while its soul is

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[1]See 'Transhumanism', Middlebury Site Network (available at https://sites.middlebury.edu/transhumanism/the-leaders/ (accessed June 2022).

craning and straining to see the imaginary seraphim that it believes must be real. Sorgner's rejection of this version of humanism and his continual turn toward a material and 'naturalistic' anthropology (p.51), along with his politics of negative freedom, are his grounds for identifying with a 'weak variant of transhumanism' (p.101).

While the third chapter, 'Pedigrees of metahumanism, posthumanism, and transhumanism', in part works to establish how these -isms fit into modernity and postmodernity, there is something of a struggle to disambiguate temporal concerns. Sorgner wants a way to handle 'epochal designation' without acknowledging their ongoing parallel influence. Marquand's (1988) framework for understanding modernity is used to create this epochal-scale view of orientations toward time (pp.43–4). The pro-modern disposition is progressive: the past was rough, though things should and will get better (though perhaps never perfect), and things are better now than they were in pre-modernity. The anti-modern disposition has two versions. One is the opposite of the pro-modern: the past was simpler in a good way, but now things will get worse. The second is an accelerated version of the pro-modern: not only was the past grim, but so is the present, and in the future all will become perfect. Pro-modern thinkers have faith in steady improvement through material progress. The pro- pre-modern anti-moderns (bear with me) might identify with myths that show our steady decline from a golden age. The pro-future anti-modern is where we find all the utopian cyborgs and uploaded soma-pumped minds of our broader topic: we are moving away from 14 billion years of very hard times, say transhumanists and their variants, but have faith – perhaps not entirely unlike that of Teilhard de Chardin (1969) – that everything that rises must converge. Still, these attitudes about values, connected as they are to time (or our conceptions of time), are not isolated from each other, and continue to influence and affect each other. Just as the Stone Age still happens if you find yourself stranded in the wild with nothing but flint to use as a tool, pre-modern and modern mind-sets are running right now, when and as they are needed, and even within transhuman and posthuman work; the bench scientist building anti-viral medications makes use of a thoroughly modern project, even if a postmodern artist wants to perform a choreography which illustrates the dissolving boundaries between human and virus identities.

Running in the background of these distinctions is the central argument of this book and its defense of transhumanism: that technology and its integration into human bodies and minds is a means to realize the good life. *Eudaimonia* is realized as we make this a world worth living in, and as our individual lives become more worth living. This 'overall enhancement of quality of life' (p.69) is the transhumanist's (and Sorgner's) agenda, and the means by which we get there – this or that particular technology – is rooted in a materialist and non-dualist view of anthropology. We may only get there, the argument goes, by giving up humanism's old appeal to a floating *nous*. Mind is an emergent property of the universe, within and throughout our bodies. The question as to how material (vs informational) this universe and the organisms that evolve within it really are remains unexamined. Is it good enough, then, to say that we are left with a naturalistic politics of enhancing the quality of life? What of the economic systems exploiting low-cost labor to make transhuman dreams come true? The 'good life' here does not consider any overall enhancement or degradation of the quality of life for the very poor, again missing an opportunity for a holistic view of the issue. Our attention is not directed toward the working conditions of Sri Lankan neodymium miners, though it is by their labor that these techno-utopian dreams can be uploaded to the consensual hallucination of the internet.

Sorgner misses a number of opportunities. Although he acknowledges the difference between the adjective 'posthuman' as related to posthumanism and the noun 'posthuman' used by transhumanists, much more could and should be done to create new ways of separating these concepts. This text, adequately equipped to lay groundwork for the ideas' places in various versions of modernity, would have been an excellent platform to challenge the conflation of the two types of posthuman, but Sorgner decides to live with the confusion and ambiguity. Imagine, instead, that we designate the after-transhuman posthuman as something like 'post-transhuman' or 'posthuman'. Even calling for a convention of hyphenation would be helpful; transhumanism's post-humans, say,

would always carry the hyphen, while posthumanism's posthuman could go commando. Readers can use their own imagination to formulate other ways of handling this, but standardization around the homonym is by now a very late need.

Another shortcoming in this work is any significant engagement with systemic and ecosystemic thinking. This is an important theme in posthumanism, as even a quick glance at the highly cited work of a Cary Wolfe or a Donna Haraway (see Haraway and Wolfe, 2016) demonstrates. Transhumanism, too, is often concerned with the environment, and sometimes understands human enhancement as a piece that fits into a bright green (*viridian* green, as Bruce Sterling (1998) put it a generation ago) future. Sorgner's discussions of transhumanism, posthumanism and metahumanism, are bound together by concerns of personal and political enhancement with little to no outward view toward the implications of these ideas for our fellow earthbound organisms. A shame, as so much of posthumanism is exactly about de-centering the human in order to consider the systems and networks we share with bacteria, styrofoam, pillbugs, corvids, monster trucks, viruses, spreadsheets and rivers. A well-explored theme in transhumanism is the notion of animal 'uplift', or non-human animal enhancement; that interest may originate from a desire, like that of John C. Lilly (n.d.) to communicate with animal minds directly. Even if animal uplift were a means to some human-centered end, such as increased organ compatibility for transplants – Sorgner does mention the work of Martine Rothblatt (2014) – or human/AI hybrid use of untapped neural loads for increased cognitive power, uplift is concerned, in its way, with animal welfare. The transhumanist philosopher David Pearce (2015), for one, sees uplift and welfare as deeply entangled and morally imperative. One would have hoped that a consideration of posthumanism and its relationship to transhumanism would have given more time and words to human relationships with non-human consciousnesses.

For Sorgner, Nietzsche (2011) at least offers a way to think about Christianity and Platonism as unuseful for the transhumanist project. Religious-minded weakness is set against the 'stronger … scientific spirit' (p.70) necessary to make do with a *Bauernschläue* of using the (material) tools at hand. And this all points toward a synthesis of transhumanism and posthumanism in Sorgner's 'methahumanism', by which he says he means something that will mediate 'the most diverse philosophical discourses in the interest of letting the appropriate meaning of relationality, perspective, and radical plurality emerge' (p.41). Given his negative views of non-material, supernatural and dualistic humanism, it is not clear that he really does intend a mediation between the most diverse philosophies. Maybe the metahuman is one of those Nietzschean 'quanta of power' (p.58) that will realign the larger constellation of Western philosophies of technology to center on a posthumanist-transhuman agenda? The emphasis on power and will over relationships and networks is indicative of an apparent interest in linear progression here, perhaps at the expense of the post-complexity dynamic and iterative processes that now drives our technology and ideologies.

Ultimately we might think of this book as a subtle new transhumanist manifesto. Though it is an academic work, concerned with the history of and relationship between ideas impacting humanity and its technological tools, the book has an agenda. The concluding chapter, 'Twelve pillars of transhumanist discourse', presents Sorgner's own views of 'foundational transhumanist positions and wide-ranging reflections on particular questions' (p.75); it reads like the warrants in support of a techno-progressive political party platform's positions. But this is hardly avoidable. Inasmuch as transhumanism may be truly concerned with making the good life available to all through technological enhancement, it must become political. Yes, like a carie in a molar that we can't stop tonguing, the omissions in this work cry out for attention – and filling. Sure, Sorgner has left humanism itself (both the agar and the catalyst for transhumanism, transhumanism's version of posthumans, posthumanism and metahumanism) less carefully analyzed than it deserves. And where are all the non-humans? As Monica Gagliano (2018) and others are showing (and as Terence McKenna (n.d.) less carefully sang about in the 1980s and 1990s), our whole ecosystem is awake with minds eager to connect with each other and with us. What of the political and cultural consequences of living alongside conscious machines, or machines that auto-evolve and blur the line

between technology and organism? These are serious holes, but, after all, this is a short book. Even so, it is sometimes repetitive because it sometimes says the same thing in a different way, over and over. Despite these criticisms, there remains much good work in this, and the result of the whole is to leave us with an important contribution to transhumanism: a book that reminds transhumanists of their place within an intellectual (if not actual) ecosystem, that establishes transhumanists' relationships to their own progenitors, and that offers clear proposals for implementing a European liberal or American para-libertarian 'weak transhumanism' in the real world. If you care about the philosophical roots of technological progress, or ways in which these may manifest themselves in future policy, you should have this one on your shelf.

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