

An Ethics for the Human Cyborg

Review

We Have Always Been Cyborgs: Digital Data, Gene Technologies, and an Ethics of Transhumanism (2021): Bristol University Press

by Stefan Lorenz Sorgner

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We are all members of that league of the superhuman – or would be, if we but had eyes to see. (Robert A. Heinlein – Lost Legacy)

We Have Always Been Cyborgs is part of the author's lifetime work to make among the wider public the "unthinkable" perspective on transhumanism a "sensible" subject, if not a "popular" one. His challenge is a very tough task, as long as for many their own transhuman condition, as Robert Heinlein claims, is too radical for being accepted. In this book, Sorgner touches upon the main topics related with far-reaching transhumanism materialization as digitalization, mind-uploading, cyborgisation, or gene technology. The overall conception on humans-technology relation is congruent, although different, with Stiegler's epyphilogenesis of humans' trough technology.

His pledge for human evolution and development is definitely circumscribed to the transhumanist creed of the accomplishment of full potentialities of humanities by means of technological enhancement based on the fundamental premise that any social and individual change is mostly self-transformation. Nonetheless, at the same time, Sorgner's view stands out vivid and original in the transhumanist landscape.

Two reasons make Sorgner special in the transhumanists ideological club. Firstly, because he promotes a metahumanist perspective, as he defines it. It is a transhumanist conception both beyond (*meta-*) and in the middle of (*meta-*), i.e. it lies in between Posthumanism and Transhumanism position.

Metahumanism strives to mediate among the most diverse philosophical discourses in the interest of letting the appropriate meaning of relationality, perspective, and radical plurality emerge. (Sorgner, 2020, p. 41)

Secondly, it is his genuine naturalist conviction. His naturalism is not a “naïve materialist understanding of the world”, but embraces “a postmodern alethic nihilism, which again can be explained most plausibly on the basis of a naturalist ontology of continual becoming” (pp. 19-20). His argument is that we are from the beginning technologically upgraded being. Reason is not a common natural trait, but an ability that is nurtured through education. Reason is an updating ability, “a technology, a technology which has become a part of who we are” (p. 13). He diminishes the importance of other issues as the mind-uploading golden path of posthumanists as being highly problematic, in the favor of gene and cyborg technologies “as the most promising means for expanding human boundaries” (p. 8). In his view, the simulation argument is not the “crux concerning whether someone counts as a transhumanist or not” (p. 29). On the contrary, for him, the simulation argument is a sterile endeavor with a pragmatic relevance no more than Middle Age teleological debates on how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. Mind-uploading issue has poor pragmatic relevance because there is “no indication for believing that digital life can even be possible”, it is a “highly dubitable procedure”, there are no strong scientific “reason for regarding it as a likely option”, and is “highly problematic as well as implausible”.

In the first chapter, Sorgner develops his philosophical position on transhumanism as being a nihilistic, positive pessimism. As he argued in a previous work (Sorgner, 2007) naturalism leads to a philosophical pessimism. In the tradition opened by Buddhism, Schopenhauer, or Nietzsche, he argues that naturalist ontology of continual becoming inevitable results in ontological pessimism. The suffering has a constant presence along the pleasure, the wellbeing is never complete, the life is an incessant struggle for living and surviving, and the absolute truth are nowhere to be found. Nevertheless, the ontological pessimism is not necessary linked with a negative perception of the world. On the contrary. Due to the creative and constitutive (*epiphylogenetical*) role of technology for the human species, the technological progress allow for a life-affirming form of pessimism, a positive ones. Hence, even if the technological progress is not perfect, it undoubtedly brought many advantages: the obvious improvement of quality of life in the past centuries, the decreasing percentage quotas of absolute poverty, the medical technologies of reduction the physiological pain, increasing of life expectancy throughout the globe, the diversification of entertainment

technology for the good life, and so on. The entire book exhibits a contagious technological optimism. Even if the technological progress brought about new dangers and perils, the transhumanist conviction is that the same technology is the answer. “Climate change is a challenge, but I regard it as a challenge which we can deal with by means of new and innovative technologies.” (p. 15)

From the ontology of continual becoming results two different types of nihilism: alethic nihilism and ethical nihilism (Sorgner, 2010). “Alethic nihilism implies that all philosophical judgements are interpretations, whereby the concept of interpretation does not imply that it has to be false, but merely that it can be false.” (p. 11) A condition shared with scientific statements. Ethical nihilism, “affirms that any non-formal judgement concerning the good life is plausible.” (p.11) At this point transhumanist perspective starkly reveals its postmodern appurtenance. All judgements are interpretation being either tautologies or pragmatic truths. The consequence for ethical judgement is that “no non-formal judgement of the good is plausible for all people” (p. 19).

In the rest of the second chapter, *On a Silicon-based Transhumanism*, Sorgner discusses some of the most pressing issues of nowadays society related with technological progress in the light of his philosophical framework. The digitalization of all processes of the lifeworld is a fact. Even if this conclusion can sound at odds for a person committed to the ideal of maximizing the negative freedom, he considers data collection as a necessary measure for ensuring freedom and progress. “There are a great number of plausible personal as well as political reasons for digitally collecting data.” (p. 31) One example is the biotechnological research and medical interventions, he claims, is in the benefit of ourselves due to the correlations between genes and ageing, life-style choices and wellbeing. He tries to make a point, from pragmatic reasons, that Chinese model of collecting data in order to promote security, taking knowledgeable public policies and promoting economic processes is preferable to European reluctance and overwhelming safety measures, which restrain such practices in the name of freedom and privacy values. This policy is also detrimental to the financial wellbeing that will decline significantly and will result in the civil wars. As consequence, the “internet panopticon” is practically inevitable in the name of personal wellbeing, social progress, and promoting... negative freedom. The ethical nihilism supports the as-good-as-it-gets solution. He points out that democratic usage of our digital data is not only desirable, but also a pragmatic necessity.

For Sorgner, a much bigger danger to social democracy and negative freedom are paternalistic ideological systems of any nature: political, cultural,

moral and alike. His philosophical meta-position support his view on the necessity to reject grand narratives, immutable values, religious ideals, or political utopias. All will become, sooner or later, harmful for some of the people. All social goals should be conceive flexible, but not without rigor, better, but not the best, “as-good-as-it-gets”, but not ultimate solutions.

The chapter on *Carbon-based Transhumanism* deals with the problems of moral bio-enhancement, gene modification and gene selection. He further argue for the idea that previous essentialist ethical system are unable to deal with the challenges raised by genomic technologies. In fact, the fundamental state of continual becoming of human being makes any absolute and fixed system of knowledge detrimental to the liberal-democratic values in long term. “Ontological judgements as part of the legal system are inevitably in contradiction to the foundations of a liberal-democratic system.” (p. 47) The ethical nihilism is contrasted with any fixed ethical system which is inevitable inappropriate for the continual becoming state of humans as transhuman, due to its specific qualities.

Firstly, ethical nihilism demands continual criticism of encrusted totalitarian structures; secondly, ethical nihilism rejects the necessity of transcending a nihilist society so that a new culture becomes established; thirdly, ethical nihilism demands promotion of institutional changes so that plurality is acknowledged, recognized, and considered appropriately on legal, ethical, and social levels. (pp. 67-68)

He illustrates the superiority of ethical nihilism conceptualization against others concepts of the good by four examples: incest, hybridization, three biological parents, and selection after IVF (*in vitro fertilization*) and PGD (*preimplantation genetic diagnosis*). In each case, no one is harmed, but the autonomy of decision for adult parents, is still violated.

In the question of moral bioenhancement, although he think that it would lead to increase likelihood of human beings to act morally on the social level, he doesn't bet on the “technological gambit”: “It is highly unlikely that moral bioenhancement will do the trick within a sufficiently short time” (p. 82), he states.

On the issue of gene modification as legitimate moral procedure, Sorgner builds his case on refuting Habermas' argument against the conception of educational and genetic enhancements as being parallel and analogous events. He provides arguments that “there is a structural analogy between educational and genetic enhancement by modification, such that the moral evaluation of these two procedures ought to be viewed as analogous” (p. 83). He points that abilities brought about genetic enhancement are not always irreversible, while the educational enhancement can have irreversible consequences. He rejects Habermas' autonomy argument, according which the enhancement limits the

potential for an autonomous way of life, on the base of that is difficult to distinguish between what *was grown* and what *was made*. The instrumentalization argument is neutralized on various bases, the most important being that it “presupposes a radically dualistic ontology that is highly dubitable” (p. 93). He contends that the inequality between genetically enhanced and those that are not, even if potentially promotes an asymmetric relationship, is not affecting at all the equality as a normative ideal. At least not more than education does. Further, he highlights the contradiction in Habermas’ view that still considers genetic therapy as morality legitimate. Sorgner shows that both have more in common than are different each other. Both presupposes a sort of alteration of genes, there is no clear-cut distinction between genetic therapy and genetic enhancement, and both cases involve the same morally legitimate parents’ decision to promote child’s life span and health.

On the *gene selection* topic, Sorgner develops an argument to show that *principle of procreative beneficence*,¹ proposed by Savulescu & Kahane (2009), is less morally plausible than *principle of reproductive autonomy* (or *procreative liberty*).² More than that, he contend that “the principle is inconsistent and that it violently attacks human beings who disagree with it, which is the reason why I regard it as an immoral principle” (p. 100). In his view, the *principle of procreative beneficence* is threatening the very goal of negative freedom and it is haunted by the shadow of eugenics.

The last chapter, *A Fictive Ethics*, is addressing to the most important ethical issues concerning transhumanism: the question of what good life means; the meaning of life; the genetic enhancement and parenting; the transhumanist key virtues of truthfulness, mindfulness and impulse control; what counts as morally right from a transhumanist perspective; and the need to considerate a plurality of concepts of the good and the relevance of expanding the health span as central guidelines for human goals in all circumstances, instead of pursuing any utopian ideal. It is a genuine type of a comprehensive ethics of technology. It illustrates the *embracing position* of a positive attitude toward technology and the belief in the manageability of the technological progress (Popoveniuc, 2022b). In this chapter,

¹ “If couples (or single reproducers) have decided to have a child, and selection is possible, then they have a significant moral reason to select the child, or the possible children they could have, whose life can be expected, in the light of the relevant available information, to go best or at least not worse than any of the others.” (Savulescu & Kahane, 2009, p. 274)

² “If reproducers have decided to have a child, and selection is possible, then any procreative option selected by reproducers is morally permissible as long as it is chosen autonomously.” (Savulescu & Kahane 2009, p. 279)

Sorgner develops the consequences of his metahumanist vision on human deeds and provides a veritable exercise of metahumanistic reasoning.

This illustrates a progressive and enlighten Weltanschauung that accomplishes his pledge for understanding transhumanism as an insightful, aspirational future state of mind, person and society.

It is non-utilitarian, nonutopian, and non-linear. It does not imply strong truth-claims. It is also non-anthropocentric, non-essentialist, and non-dualistic like most critical posthumanist philosophies. Hence, it lies in between post- and transhumanism. (p. 110)

The pillars of Sorgner's anti-utopian transhumanism vision are the dynamic dialectical relationship of freedom, equality, and solidarity, the radical plurality of goodness, and the affirmation of a culture of plurality, science, and relationality. All of these are conceived realistic, as part of the continual becoming state of human being, and not as absolute and final utopian goals. The utopian unconditionality dangers of perfect society are tempered by moderate goals of *a decent work-life balance with a lot of vacation time, non-violence as a social and a lived ideal, and an increased lifespan or even better: a longer-lasting health span.*

The entire book has a very captivating and engaging style. The examples are very illustrative although the most ideas are the result of very powerful and deep philosophical insights. It is enjoyable to read such an enthusiastic and confident depiction of our society in its way of becoming and I think I am among those who "can hardly wait for our posthuman future to occur." Although it shares the same hubris feeling which feeds the transhumanist creed in its deepest roots, it is not an unmeasured or reckless one, but a tempered and realistic. This thing provides a comfortable and secured feeling of hope and confidence. The advantage of transhumanist (in particular, metahumanist) vision over posthumanist one is that the former is driven by the wish for *better*, not for an utopian and dangerous, uncertain and impossible to be apprehended *best*. In fact, this is what transhumanism is: the continual bettering of human species. I am agree with that and totally embracing it.

Nonetheless, what I see in our past and all around the world nowadays makes me wonder if while reading Sorgner's book, I did not fall under the spell of transhumanist wishful thinking. The *ought*, fictitious or not, have to be always built on what it *is*. Otherwise, it is doomed to fail. The "solution" of pervasive surveillance is a very dangerous enterprise. Even if "there seems to be no other way", at the present level of moral development of human species which is still mostly characterized by features or strong tendencies toward paternalism, tribalism, nationalism, racism, parochialism, religious dogmatism, fundamentalism

and so on, I doubt that the political power of the required panopticon will not be diverted to harmful scopes. Consonant with Sorgner, “I wish to stress very much that my analysis is not one about which I am happy” (p. 38). Throughout human history, too many desirable and noble political and social ideals and principles in many political ideologies, in theory, became social nightmares, in practice. For this reason, how the metahumanist principles can be implemented without being perverted, become more decisive than their substance. The proposed liberal ethics of a fictitious autonomy, that realization of negative freedom implies, is hard to be sustainable in a society, more and more fluid and virtualized, where people have many troubles to keep with simpler traditional principles of ethics. The crush of pluralist ethics is even a more difficult task, more than promoting a relational ethics. But Sorgner warns us that relational ethic “restores dangerous totalitarian and paternalistic structures that must be avoided at all costs” (p. 47). In the best case, this is a conundrum. The implementation at cultural and social level of the liberal ethics of a fictitious autonomy is very improbable. Contrasting, there is an ontological support for relational ethics. The contemporary society is more relational than ever and the individual selfhood is nurtured and built by the specific roles and relationships in which it is engaged (Rachels, 1975). As Charles H. Cooley said, *people are not who others think they are or who they think they are, but people are who they think others think they are*. In the present deeply networked *onlife* living, even the traditional concept of privacy cannot be conceived in an essentialist way, but have to be lessen to a more fluid and relational form as “contextual integrity” (Nissenbaum, 2010). The fact that the negative freedom can be conceived in unnumbered conflicting ways by various individuals it is a recipe for conflict and violence.

So, there are few reasons to believe that society can naturally embrace a liberal ethics of a fictitious autonomy in a sustainable way. At the same time, there is no sound solution offered in the book. The envisaged paths are still debatable. The perspective is enthusiastic, based on a natural democratic functioning of check and balance and an overconfidence in human reasonableness. If people would understood that the differences and conflicts results from the plurality of goodness held by equally trustful and sincere individuals they would cease to dispute and embrace the suggested ethical vision.

Moreover, there is the unbalance between liberal democratic and authoritarian-paternalistic values. The liberal democratic tolerates the pluralistic types of good, but traditional ones don't. How will be set the course toward transhuman society and mentality if, from the democratic liberal perspective, any

axiological interference is forbidden? The pluralistic tolerance promotes negative freedom and rejects any manipulation or coercion.

Instead, moral psychology provide evidence that the social-democratic political perspective of transhumanism is hardly compatible with the libertarian goal of maximizing the negative freedom and accommodating the various concepts of the good. Those who advocate genuine democratic moral foundations as Fairness/Unjustice or Harm/Care have difficulties in getting along with those who embraces radically different social views (Haidt, 2012; LaFollette & Woodruff, 2015).

Definitely an ethical nihilist conception and a liberal ethics of fictive autonomy offer solid foundation for negative freedom and strong defense against “dangerous totalitarian and paternalistic structures that must be avoided at all costs” (p. 47). But the critical question is how such conceptions can culturally prevail? This is the big challenge. Not only what kind of ethics and political regime is theoretical preferred, but how it can be realized in practice? The scientific knowledge on human psychology give us little hope that an individualist ethics of maximizing negative freedom is sustainable. At least not at this time. It requires not only individuals able to live in a democratic system with judicial benchmarks for blatant breakings of ethical and moral standards, but individuals with higher levels of moral competence and critical thinking (Lind, Sandberger & Bargel, 1985; Lind, 2012; Popoveniuc, 2022a).

The healthy ethical individualism characteristic, in part, to consolidated democracies is in permanent danger of failing into autarchic individualism and social autism (Gavreliuc, 2011). The technological power, the promises for unlimited individual enhancing and happiness up to the limit of godlike state touch upon the limits of ethical reasoning and humans’ moral. Good life, well-being, happiness, pleasure, extended lifespan all trigger human frenzied hubris alike religious promises of afterlife, blessing, choosing, fortune or safekeeping. In this matters the people’s moral competence reaches its limits, as studies show (Lind, 2003). Even those with higher moral competence on judging regular or basic ethical-moral dilemma, can fail to the level of moral incompetence on the issues with higher stakes as gene selection, bioenhancement, euthanasia, abortion etc., phenomenon known as “moral segmentation”. Higher moral and civic competencies required for the envisaged transhuman democratic society depends on the quality of education, the applied curriculum, and the type of socialization (Aghbal, 2014). The negative freedom maximizing society prerequisites a very elevated moral and ethical understanding of commonality and shared concern in collective interest matters. Unfortunately, this is not the case, at least at this

moment, in any country in the world. The limits of negative freedom sustainability have revealed harshly and painfully during COVID-19 pandemic, in the climate change crisis, and in all mankind “tragedies of the commons” (Hardin, 1968).

In this point, the transhumanism paradigm reveals its true status close to a young cultural paradigm still closed to a social wishful thinking. The metahumanist perspective are discursively “meta”-supported, that is it remains in between, incomplete and partial, reasoning is not complete, the premises support conclusion in part. It leaves the impression that the reasoning is substantial and very convincing, but still something important is missing. It depicts *how the things have to be* if we will be trustful, honest and open-minded. However, what is omitted is precisely the details *how the things can become* as such. Higher social ideals are to be found in the entire history of human species, but until now, only very feeble forms of sustainable beneficial regimes were accomplished. In fact, the reasoning is a paradoxically self-supporting, because we will naturally think in this way if we would be transhuman. But we are not. A wishful-thinking feeling accompanies us throughout the book. As in the case of presentation of last century progress of humanity toward liberal and democratic values that seems enough (Fukuyama, 1989), but an unbiased look reveals it is not (Brown, 1999). Old moral and human character flaws are present everywhere together with the tribal, paternalistic, and totalitarian “virtues”. The promotion of as-good-as-get negative freedom with pluralist concept of good presupposed a majority with a higher level of understanding and open-mindedness such as the argument has a breeze of circularity. For the same reasons, the anti-utopian conception of as-good-as-it-gets continual becoming solution for political regime, public policies, although seen as continuous process, it also sound as a utopic (dynamic) state.

Regarding the concept of fictive ethics, it remains suspended without any criteria, at the will of the relative and arbitrary as-good-as-it-gets solution of everyone is considering from the perspective of its history, education and origin.

Even though any concept of the right is regarded as fictive, this does not imply that it is arbitrary. We do have criteria for evaluating moralities. These criteria are historically and culturally embedded, but this does not mean that they are meaningless. They are meaningful for our lives. (p. 109)

As such, they are likewise crushing (Huntington, 1997). From my perspective, even the ground for sound and beneficial moralities is arbitrary, the most different types of moralities can be consistent and nonexclusive if their bearers are moral competent and critical thinkers. Plural moralities can live together only under the conditions that their bearers are capable of being aware of the fact that any true moral is inherently deluded in part and a possible source of

needless intellectual and emotional suffering and frustration. At the same time, they must be able to embrace an Ethics of As-If (*Als Ob*) as is the case with all human culture demoted to the level of useful fictive creations (Vaihinger, 1925). The fictive autonomy and nihilist ethics supposed the ability to accomplish an ethical *epoché* (conceived by analogy with the Husserl's (1983) phenomenological reduction) of bracketing or parenthesizing (*Einklammerung*) the ethical principles that were formerly had taken for granted in the natural attitude. And this is a tremendous difficult task, which very few can master.

The alethic and ethical fictionalism is also a tough bet. Its challenge can be illustrated by the two-fold hermeneutic interpretations of William Blake's (1901, II.3. [15]) phrase: "No bird soars too high if he soars with his own wings". From a optimistic motivational perspective, it could be read that *humans are capable of achieving their full potentialities only if they rely and believe in themselves*. From a realistic perspective, it express the delusion of *a bird flying in the air that could think that it will do better if it would flying in the void*. "If there are no facts, but only continual becoming, then a judgement cannot correspond to anything." (p. 18) The negative freedom is free to flourish, only on the expense of epistemic and ethical confidence altogether. Alethic nihilism is inexistent in scientific perspective and debatable in philosophical speculation (Asay, 2021). It shares the same problem with postmodernist paradigm, in general, as being self-contradictory self-referential. As Sorgner analysis reveals, the popular image of transhumanists as positive visionaries and activists conceals its roots in a philosophical pessimism vision of the world as a place of suffering with short and temporary reliefs (p. 13).

There are many other issues on which the Sorger's insights that are worthy to be deepened and developed. Sorgner ingeniously shows how the pessimism, intrinsic to the naturalist view of a natural world devoid of transcendence, myths, and higher moral worlds, can support a positive epistemology. As is expected, the technology is the key. However, technology understood not in its narrow sense of engineered devices, but as everything epigenetic which enables us to improve the quality of life. The technological enhancement is functionally substantial identical with education.

The kybernaetes is the helmsman of a ship, the one who steers and directs a ship. 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 sapiens. (p. 13)

The Reason is a technology in its quality of being an instrument for surviving, self-enhancement and gaining satisfactions. The Reason made us who we are, as humans. It is a mean and a part of us. However, I think that a distinction

between technology and *technê* would be appropriate here. Reason is not as much a technology, but a *technê*. Education is not technology as vaccination, which also it enhances human capacities, but it does it a different way, as *technê*.

Furthermore, the question of mind uploading and simulation argument, as a significant theme of transhumanists and posthumanists conception, is worthy to be developed and nuanced. The popular image of uploading (downloading?) the neuronal map on a hard-drive provides a poor framework for understanding the issue. What we call experience is already, as Sorgner points out, a created reality. We have no access to the reality in itself, but we are living in a simulated reality. Nonetheless, our experienced realities are presumably alike, although not identical, due to the common psycho-physiological embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended (4E) cognition (Newen & De Bruin, 2018) and shared education and culture. The reason and education, as enhancing technologies, assure the synchronic individualization, because they are both shared “egopoietic technologies” (Floridi, 2011). To the extent that the self is (made of) information, we are already living in our individual simulated reality as psychological creation of the world (by our sensations, perceptions, cognitive schemas, personal narratives and any other informational process) (Durt, Fuchs & Tewes, 2017). In an increasing technologically XR, ICTs are also technologies of the self. The cognition, consciousness are gradual virtualization within the process of self-individualization (Floridi, 2011). In this sense, we already live in a simulation, the shared cultural reality, and soon in more and more substantial XR. From this perspective, the projected uploading the mind is a non-sense. We should talk instead about developing and enhancing the human Xmind.

No change was possible in the history of humankind without the work of enthusiastic visionaries. Either the transhumanism is in the making or it stays about to be born, it requires such insightful and prospective visions for moving it from unthinkable domain toward acceptable for public perception and, why not, ending in desirable. Sorgner entire life work, not only this book, circumscribes to his manifest of a moderated visionary hubris as a continuous process of bettering, thus avoiding the trap of dangerous well-established utopian goals. It conveys a passionate, but assuring feeling of trust in the (trans)human progress. It opens mind and enlarges the perspective on what can possible mean the individual and collective development, progress, and enhancement.

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