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REVIEW

We Have Always Been Cyborgs: Digital Data, Gene Technologies, and an Ethics of Transhumanism. **By Stefan L. Sorgner. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2021. 240 pages. ISBN: 978-1529219210. $149.95, Hardcover.**

TRANSHUMANISM GETS AN UPGRADE

NATASHA BERANEK[1]

Transhumanism affirms the use of emerging gene and cyborg technologies as a way to promote our collective survival as well as our most fulfilling individual fruition. Due to the latter, it is frequently associated with notions of perfection.

As a childhood gymnast, I became very well acquainted with its pursuit. The pointed toe, the straight leg, the split leap locked into a 180 degree angle – ostensibly gymnastics is an extended dance in distancing oneself from the fallibility of flesh and bone existence. This is not the sort of perfection that most gymnasts are pursuing though. An intensely psychological endeavor, to be a gymnast is to be engaged in an ongoing mastery of one's hopes and fears, one's impulses and drives, all while repeatedly being yanked back down into a gritty sensorium of ripped blisters and chalk dust. Under the stewardship of coaches, gymnasts track their progress – the acquisition of each new skill and the triumph

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over every nagging fear a sort of 'upgrade' in their development. Pushing ever further against the laws of physics, gymnasts say "yes," again and again, to the pain of everyday practice. *Amor fati*, love of one's fate, is the mantra these athletes murmur as they chase fleeting moments of aerial freedom and corporeal power.

A gymnastics routine is ostensibly based upon an established dynamic between an athlete, a piece of equipment, and gravity, with the balance beam or uneven bars serving simply as a piece of technology over which the gymnast temporarily exerts control. Yet an apparatus is much more than a means to a stuck landing. When the 2020 Olympic gold medalist Nina Derwael (see Olivera 2021) explains that "the [uneven] bars speak to me, and in return I listen," she is describing a relation in flux, ceaselessly becoming anew in the time and space between. The philosopher Tobias Rees is speaking to such moments of possibility when he defines *poetry* as something that attempts to "capture that which cannot be captured" (Rees 2018, 26). Gymnasts in flight crack open and make visible our human defined order of things – an ontological landscape that has been dominant since the Enlightenment.

Forthcoming innovations in AI, synthetic biology, and cyborgization are similarly unfolding outside of our taken-for-granted understandings of human, nature, and technology. Microbiome research throws into question where microorganisms end and the individual 'self' begins. Like Simone Biles' highly publicized case of the "twisties," (see Reeve 2021) a condition that renders a gymnast completely disoriented in the air, the philosophical vertigo that these 21st century inventions and scientific discoveries induce has the potential to be debilitating, leaving us feeling rudderless, unsure of our identity and our relation to the world around us.

They also bring to the fore monumental pragmatic challenges for how we may most authentically and empathetically live amid these breakthroughs. For example, as gene technologies continue to expand, what limits, if any, should be placed upon parents who wish to 'enhance' their children's intelligence or athletic aptitude?

Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, a German philosopher based at John Cabot University in Rome, has been broadly engaged with these questions for

the past decade, and his new book, *We Have Always Been Cyborgs: Digital Data, Gene Technologies, and an Ethics of Transhumanism* tackles their intricacies head on. The title encapsulates Sorgner's fundamental appeal to his readers. In order to most smoothly navigate and benefit from the next act of the Digital Age, when these technologies will begin to enter the human body, we must realize that since the dawn of *Homo sapiens* we have been "steered" organisms (*cyborgs*) involved in a series of "upgrades," including language acquisition, education, and vaccination. Brain-computer interfaces like Elon Musk's Neuralink will simply be the next step in our long history of cyborgization – albeit one, Sorgner admits, for which our capacity to guide our own evolution is exponentiated. Dualistic modes of thinking that cast nature as 'pure' (and 'good') while dismissing technology as 'artificial' (and 'bad') are not only flawed; they unnecessarily hamper our potential to thrive.

A self-identified "weak" transhumanist, Sorgner's vision is significantly influenced by the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche – a factor, he admits, that makes his already minefield-laden philosophical trek even more volatile, given Nietzsche's unfortunate appropriation by the Third Reich and eugenicists. As it already stands, transhumanists tend to receive one-sided portrayals in the media, being cast, Sorgner says, as "cold-hearted, blood-sucking, Silicon Valley billionaires" (Sorgner 2021, 5).

Straight from the jump, Sorgner thus distances his vision of transhumanism from these more specious portrayals. He also takes pains to differentiate his weak approach from those of other notable transhumanists, such as Oxford's Nick Bostrom, who upholds a Renaissance ideal of perfection that Sorgner finds implausible, as well as a Simulation Argument (see Bostrom 2003, 243-255) that he regards as largely irrelevant. Rather than focusing on more fantastical forms of "silicon-based" humanity, such as mind uploading, his concept of the good life is one that stresses a "carbon-based" practical relevance and fosters a greater plurality of avenues towards human flourishing.

Even so, as a "positive pessimist," Sorgner aligns himself with most transhumanists' optimism about technological innovation. Yes, our lives are full of struggle, and with moments of pleasure (espressos, sexual euphoria, met work deadlines) too brief and too few and

far between. Considering how much vaccination, antibiotics, and anesthetics -– all recent developments in the grand scheme of things – have improved our lives though, we should be hopeful that newly emerging technologies will continue to alleviate our suffering.

How receptive one is to Sorgner's proposals is likely to be a reflection of how well one perceives liberalism to be currently working as a dominant political model. This cannot be overstated. In *We Have Always Been Cyborgs*, underlying each of Sorgner's proposals about parenting, education, morphological modification, sexuality, and reproductive technologies is his allegiance to the norm of negative freedom, a core Enlightenment value that aims to safeguard personal freedom from outside interference. "I am not claiming that it is always morally and legally acceptable to act in accord with one's own authentic wish," he writes. "A person's freedom ends where the freedom of another person begins" (Sorgner 2021, 137). Sorgner's ethical nihilism would not condemn an adult brother and sister who mutually consent to sexual relations, but it would strongly reject the actions of a pedophile, who in pursuing his or her idiosyncratic drives, is harming others. Certainly this is a stark example. Anthropologists have long observed incest – of varying degrees of closeness – as a universal cultural taboo. Yet Sorgner's view of negative freedom would override this taboo, rendering it paternalistic and violent.

With all of this 'freedom' talk in mind, I wouldn't be surprised if the eyebrows of readers who are new to Sorgner will raise when they arrive at *Cyborg*'s section on digital privacy. I can hear people asking, "How is it not an utter contradiction in terms for Sorgner to cherish a radically pluralistic concept of the good on the one hand, while on the other concluding that we must inevitably accept total surveillance via RFID chipping? How could we ever truly safeguard our freedom, our individual power, if there's no longer any privacy? If our biometric data is constantly being entered into an Internet of Bodily Things?"

Key to understanding Sorgner's consent to an Internet Panopticon is his perspective that it is not freedom and *privacy* that are synonymous, but freedom and *health*. Aging, he writes, is the worst mass murderer in the world. In order to prolong our healthspan – the number of *vital* (not total) years we enjoy on this planet – we must take full advantage of the

scientific knowledge and medical innovations that will arise from the collection of a wide range of our personal data. This is because most human beings identify an increase of the healthspan with a higher likelihood of living a good life. The predictive maintenance of our health will inevitably be improved the more data is collected concerning correlations between aging, genes, and lifestyle choices. Aging should be approached as disease rather than an undoable process, but unlike many Silicon Valley transhumanists who strive for immortality via cryonics or mind-uploading, Sorgner's pragmatism leads him to conclude that our entrance into Big Data is our most realistic chance to promote the flourishing of all individuals.

It is a reluctant conclusion on Sorgner's part. "I wish to stress very much that my analysis is not one about which I am happy, as I am aware that the risks and dangers for a liberal system are enormous" (Sorgner 2021, 38). Yet most of us are only one or two clicks away from an abundance of social media evidence that indicates we don't cherish our privacy as much as we like to think, and so Sorgner is fairly convincing in his conclusion that what we actually fear about total surveillance is not a loss of privacy, but that we might be *unfairly sanctioned* for our genetics, disease states, personal preferences, or behaviors.

All the more reason, he argues, that the norm of negative freedom must be culturally promoted and legally protected. In an Internet Panopticon, no one holds a privileged privacy position; there are no guardians and prisoners as such. "Norms and values are just as much fictions as money," (Sorgner 2021, 41) writes Sorgner, so it is left up to us to truly *believe* in the value of radical plurality as our digital privacy fades. On a geopolitical scale too, in order to keep pace technologically with China, it will be necessary for us to develop a democratic method for collecting and using Big Data. Not only does the Chinese government already collect data in massive quantities, but its citizens are more amenable to this system given their relatively collectivist orientation towards subsuming the individual to the common good.

If the most promising means for promoting human flourishing are to be found within the carbon-based realm, then how can we most responsibly engage? Here the Nietzschean flavor of Sorgner's transhumanism fully emerges. Nietzsche, like Darwin, viewed humans

as being gradually (rather than categorically) different from non-human animals. Their naturalist and evolutionary perspective broke with a metaphysical tradition that poised humans as part immaterial soul, part material body. Despite this 19th century rupture, a dualistic metaphysical understanding of personhood has persisted in our social and legal systems, as has a Christian one. In Sorgner's view, this is an *immoral* state of affairs because it impinges on the degree to which we can make autonomous choices about our use of biotechnologies.

In particular he directs his discussion towards the decision making of parents or parents-to-be. For example, if it is metaphysically unclear whether a fertilized egg has a special status or not, then it should be up to the specific parents who are using pre-implantation testing (PGD) and in-vitro fertilization, rather than the state, to determine its moral status. Where there is disagreement on reproductive technologies, Sorgner writes, legalization should occur in favor of more freedom.

Bioethical debates about non-human personhood and what counts as harm remain strongly enmeshed in Kantian metaphysics, adding kindling to what many are likely to view as Sorgner's provocative conclusion that the person-object dichotomy simply cannot be upheld. Contra Jürgen Habermas, one of the most prominent German philosophers of the 20th century, Sorgner does not regard parents who would genetically enhance their children as threatening their children's autonomy or as immorally 'instrumentalizing' them. As in many other places throughout *Cyborgs*, Sorgner supports his perspective by drawing a structural and moral analogy between parental education (*i.e*. child rearing) and genetic enhancement.

> "In both cases," he writes, "decisions are being made by parents concerning the development of their child, at a stage where the child cannot yet decide […] Parents usually love their children and want them to have the best possible starting points in life. Of course, parental decisions do not always produce good results. But, as a rule of thumb, parental influence most often leads to better outcomes than those from chance or without any guidance." (Sorgner 2021, 86)

Sorgner counters Habermas's other concerns about the genetic modification of children -– foremost among them, its seeming irreversibility and embodied expression– by reference to cutting edge research in the fields of epigenetics, siRNA therapy, and gene silencing.

In the wrap up to *Cyborgs*, Sorgner resolves any lingering doubts that readers may have about the details of his transhumanist alignment with Nietzsche. There are certain aspects of Nietzsche's thinking that Sorgner regards as immoral, such as his vision of a two-class, master and slave society. Such a hierarchical structure is deeply illiberal, and Sorgner cherishes liberalism above all else.

Yet Nietzsche's basic impulses, based as they were upon self-discovery, truthfulness, and the will-to-power, are those that Sorgner finds indispensable to a radically pluralistic understanding of perfection, and he offers Nietzsche's theory of the Eternal Recurrence as providing a possible framework for life's meaning. "Someone lives a good life by following their very own idiosyncratic psychophysiological demands, their very own desires, passions and fantasies…. [But] to become aware of one's very own drive is much more difficult than is often believed" (Sorgner 2021, 166)[2]. Plumbing one's depths is a personal responsibility, and it is often painful. Yet it is the avenue by which we can experience "that special moment, which is worth all the suffering [we] have to endure, as [we] know that this one special moment will recur again and again." (Sorgner 2021, 178)

Transhumanism is not a religion, despite the focus that many of its retinue place on ethereal aims like immortality, disembodied consciousness, and perfection. Nor can transhumanism be accurately glossed as an ideology, given its diversity of opinions on possible 'beyond human' outcomes. *We Have Always Been Cyborgs* instead renders transhumanism much more terrestrial, demonstrating that it is better understood as a philosophically informed *positive attitude* towards the use of technologies. It is interested in providing innovative options for our existence rather than introducing dystopian constraints on our individuality. Sorgner's book encourages us to realize that before we can avail ourselves of emerging technologies, we need to do the work of questioning the boundaries between human, nature, and technology. If done well, such an endeavor will inevitably lead to even more provocative questions: What do these categories even mean? How and

[2] See also Sorgner 2016, 141–157.

why did we come to take them for granted? And what makes us feel that we need to cling to them so tightly?

All around us are fissures containing new ways of thinking and radically different options for living and being in the world. Like gymnasts in flight, when we break these fissures open, we create the poetry of unanticipated liberation. And that too, is perfection.

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