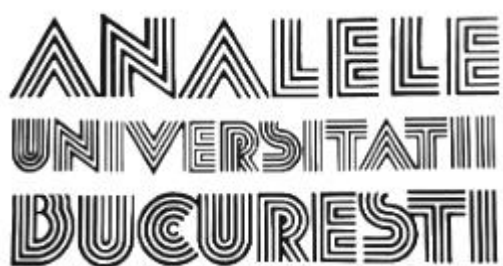


What society for our posthuman future? A task for the serious transhumanist thinker

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**ANNALS of the University of Bucharest  
Philosophy Series**

Vol. LXXI, no. 1, 2022  
pp. 185 – 197.



# WHAT SOCIETY FOR OUR POSTHUMAN FUTURE? A TASK FOR THE SERIOUS TRANSHUMANIST THINKER

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## *Abstract*

What is still lacking in the expanding research field of transhumanism is a serious investigation of the social existence and its role in the shaping of the future. Taking Sorgner's recent book, *We have always been cyborgs*, as a guide, the paper investigates the roots and possible reasons of the societal blindness that seems to be so prevalent in the transhumanist community. The analysis shows that the principled positions that are by and large accepted in the community, notably Sorgner's alethic and ethical nihilism, which inform the political-philosophical liberalism of most if not all of its members are untenable without an underlying historical reasoning that sees the evolution of the societies as virtually complete. Since this historical argument is always nonfactual, it results that the question about the future society can and must be addressed if transhumanism is to keep with its philosophical programme.

**Keywords:** *Sorgner, Stefan Lorenz, transhumanism, society, utopianism, critique.*

## **On the Seriousness of Post- and Transhumanist Studies**

Seriousness has always been a trait of the continental philosophical tradition (Lu 2013), without which both its ambition and rigour are unthinkable. Indeed, to be accused of lacking seriousness is one of the most damning in the philosophical profession. On the other hand, being "tierisch ernst" means, in a certain German tradition, being a bit too serious, being too narrowly focused on an issue at the expense of the larger context, and has to do perhaps with either immaturity or a failure

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to come to terms with one's own contingency (Dries 2014, 459; Buck-Morss 1977, 193).

Rumour has it that transhumanism (and posthumanism for that matter) is not a serious academic or even intellectual preoccupation. And this might be the main reason why they haven't become what some of their long-standing proponents hoped for (an academic field of study in their own right, that is), and might never receive the recognition and respectability philosophy enjoyed for so many centuries. I maintain however that the post- and transhumanist studies do represent a serious field of investigation, and the problem, in fact, is that the post- and transhumanist thought is still immature, or, dare I say, "tierisch ernst".

Of course, this seriousness must be demonstrated by recourse to the history of thought and the pressing matters of the present. And secondly, it must be met accordingly by serious reflection on the crucial issues – and this is the bone I've got to pick with most if not all transhumanists.

At the end of a brilliant retake of the core concepts of Enlightenment, Foucault called for a radical shift in the main philosophical programme of criticism, away from the concern with the necessary limits of the human to the investigation of their possible transgressions, pledging for an "ontology of the present and of ourselves", a critical interrogation that is meant to open up the door to the future (Foucault 1986). If this Foucauldian ontology of the present is indeed a serious philosophical proposition, then so is, *mutatis mutandis*, the whole spectrum of post- and transhumanist studies (Ghiman 2021). The two are further linked by their shared origin in the project of Enlightenment understood historical-philosophically as transgression (Passerin D'Entreves 1996, 12). These few lines are only gesturing in the direction of the historical link that binds contemporary post- and transhumanist fundamental problems with the core issues of modernity as a whole, a problematic that, for different reasons, is being explored more and more in the recent years (See, for instance, Hughes 2010; 2012; Saage 2013). Furthermore, I think it's fair to say that transhumanism is at its core preoccupied with our technological present and future. This is perhaps the most pressing concern for any serious attempt to understand what kind of a world we have made for ourselves. It is easy to see, then, that both in

historical-philosophical perspective and in the light of contemporary concerns, transhumanism (and posthumanism) do seem to be serious preoccupations.

**One Recent Book as A Case in Point:  
Sorgner's *We Have Always Been Cyborgs***

I am happy to report that I am not alone in stressing the philosophical seriousness of the field, and in calling for an appropriate seriousness in addressing the task of developing an "ontology of the present and of ourselves". In his latest book, *We have always been cyborgs*, Sorgner (2022) makes a point of underlining that the core value of negative freedom, central for the transhumanist intellectual community, is one of the main achievements of the Enlightenment (Sorgner 2022, 31, 48, 59) without which the giant leap forward in the natural sciences and engineering would have been, perhaps, impossible (Sorgner 2022, 80). This insistence on the link between the Enlightenment and transhumanist thought, reductive and pro domo as it may well be, is worthy of a thorough examination; the simple fact that the emancipation project of Enlightenment is still unfinished (Honneth *et al.* 1992) warrants it. Sorgner also is of the opinion that transhumanism has a lot in common with postmodernism and the subsequent posthumanism and even advocates for "metahumanism" as an inclusive alternative to both trans- and posthumanism (Sorgner 2022, 138). He also calls repeatedly for seriousness - and not for lacking other rhetorical means.

I find myself in agreement with Sorgner on all these matters of principle, and regard his latest book as a promising starting point. Nonetheless, I am dissatisfied with it in at least one crucial point that is still not considered seriously: the question of the future outlook of human society. I would argue that this matter is symptomatically shunned not only by Sorgner, but by the entire transhumanist literature, albeit in Sorgner's case it is somewhat easier to point out the importance of it within the logic of his book.

This is why I would endeavour to develop my point through a discussion of Sorgner's recent book, *We have always been cyborgs*. It's not

going to be a book discussion, since I am primarily concerned not with what is being said in this book, but rather with what it is not said, and why it goes unsaid. I agree with Sorgner where he calls for seriousness, but maintain that his book falls short of the mark of seriousness in a crucial point: that of accounting for the social reality. I argue that this blind spot is a symptom for the whole transhumanist community. Sorgner's book however seems to be more welcoming towards the kind of criticism I would formulate here, that is not intended as a dismissal of the author's efforts, but rather as a way of orienting efforts to (again) serious efforts to tackle acute issues.

### **Being Cyborg Is Being Part of a Society**

Sorgner wastes no time to explain why we, as humans, have always been cyborgs. Etymologically, cyborg refers back to the old *kybernaetes*, helmsman of a ship. Since each member of the *Homo sapiens sapiens* species is steered in a non-metaphorical fashion by its educators, we have always been and will be, for the foreseeable future, steered organisms (Sorgner 2022, 22). Now, of course, education eventually "upgrades" humans, imbues them with the tools of reason, and, if one remains on this side of the Enlightenment project, enables them to steer themselves and, eventually, to leave behind the need to adapt to natural environment and move towards creating an environment thought better suited for human life. This also allows for further hybridization projects to take shape. Being cyborgs, then, means that we, as individuals, need the prosthetic of society to even survive, let alone thrive.

If one admits that humans have always been steered organism in the sense described by Sorgner, one has to admit that humans are, as the old Aristotelian definition goes, "political animals", or, better said, beings that only exist as such as long as they are part of society. Unless the emancipation sought by the Enlightenment (and its presumptive heir, transhumanism) is the emancipation from society, the progress of human beings must be put in the context of society, even in the context of the progress of society as such. To put it bluntly: there is no serious

transhumanism without a critical investigation of whether and how would we come about a society for our post-human future.

### **Societal Blindness**

It seems that any discussion about human improvement or enhancement must naturally lead to a discussion about society. But the transhumanist community skews it by resorting to “species” and “individual” instead. If indeed society is one major avenue for human improvement, then transhumanists bear the burden of explaining why it is not worth discussing it. The reader is entitled to know why society does not matter. One would expect that such an attitude comes as a result of careful reasoning and consequent decisions. If there is a thorough investigation of this issue in the transhumanist camp, I failed to notice it. Instead, I will try to put together the bits and pieces from Sorgner’s book that might amount to such an argument against discussing about the future of human societies. I hope this might serve as an invitation to further work that might bring to light the ideas about society that are harboured by the members of this community.

First, I would discuss the potential consequences of Sorgner’s professed alethic and ethical nihilism. Secondly, I would analyse his rejection of utopianism. And thirdly, I would look for the type of societal organization that he seems to privilege, before turning to a critique of his position.

### **Alethic and Ethical Nihilism Signals the End of Societal Evolution of Humanity**

“Alethic nihilism” is the term Sorgner uses instead of the more common “relativism”: an epistemological position that “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” (Sorgner 2022, 11). Ethical nihilism is a further consequence of this position in the realm of value judgements: “the ethical

perspective that no non- formal judgement of the good is plausible for all people.” (Sorgner 2022, 19) For Sorgner, this position precludes “serious transhumanists” from arguing in favour of political authoritarianism and makes them naturally uphold liberal views. Indeed, it seems evident that in absence of absolute truth and universal value, we are bound to “contingent nodal points” of stability of our worldviews, convictions and beliefs that should not be imposed on others simply because sooner or later they might be rendered obsolete or flat out wrong. Negative freedom is a right borne from the humility of reason, and it must be maintained for as long as possible as a historical achievement of human societies against any type of fundamentalism as an expression of its hubris. (Sorgner 2022, 19, 21)

The history of humanity, and the evolution of human society, seems to have reached for Sorgner an endpoint in which all the struggles to impose a specific idea of good onto others on the basis of its universal relevance are exposed as being logical and epistemological fallacies: there is no common good, there is no common goal other than as a contingent nodal point subjected to change. A potential consequence of this survey of human history is that, indeed, the liberal, democratic organisation of society is simply the last logical step in the evolution of society: there is no going beyond that. All that is to do within society is to expand the boundaries of generally accepted freedoms and rights the individuals should enjoy, and the task of transhumanism is to contribute towards that end by advocating for the social and, perhaps, legal recognition of extended concepts of morphological, educational and reproductive freedoms as human rights. Since the societal becoming of humanity has reached its logical endpoint, the role of standard bearer of progress must now be assumed by the individual.

I can see no other way of understanding the societal blindness in Sorgner’s book than as a consequence of such sort of argument that I formulated here. For if we are indeed “steered organisms”, the only way of avoiding talk of rudder is by maintaining that, by and large, the direction has been already set for good. This would imply a subterranean historical reasoning I would address later, as it seems to bear the full weight of the argument. The second observation that I would make here for later use is that the concept of “contingent nodal

point” is conveniently vague from a sociological perspective: it only seems to obscure the way societies work.

### **Utopianism as Taboo**

Sorgner has a decidedly non-utopian take on transhumanism (Sorgner 2022, 62, 110, 162), and he has good reasons for that. Utopias stem from a reflection on the good life in general. Once they enter the political field of ideas they threaten pluralism and the diversity of the concepts of good his presentist relativism rests upon. For Sorgner utopias must be dangerous in principle: they are the thoughts that should not be thought in our present by a consequent alethic and ethical nihilist (compare with Sorgner 2022, 157). Utopias, then, are a mental taboo. It follows that the search for a rational society is also taboo, at least because it rests upon the premise that reason can indeed assume and complete the task of realizing such a thing that would be, in a way, less contingent.

My first observation here is that this position, as principled and consequent as it is, tends to treat society more as a natural object, as a fact, and not as an artefact, which it certainly is. (It reminds me of a phenomenon much discussed in a different philosophical tradition, called reification.)

The second observation I will return to later is that, in fact, our current societal model in the western world would not have come into existence without a certain type of rationality, and is still inhabited by one. It is something that continental social philosophers call ideology or grand narrative, and Foucauldians analyse as governmentality.

The third observation is a bit more technical (and perhaps should have come first). As Saage (2013) shows, there are marked differences between the modern utopias and the type of transhumanist techno-visions Sorgner himself discusses (and partly rejects) under the same term. They appear to rest on different anthropological premises. Modern utopianism differentiates between a factual nature of human beings, that shares information and evolves biogenetically, and an artificial, artefactual, second nature of human beings, *i.e.* the social world they



created, with its own “tradigenic” evolutionary path (Saage 2013, 3), that Sorgner would call education (compare with 2022, 85). For modern utopianism progress involves the construction of a new tradition, of a new society, leaving the natural human being and its biogenetic evolution more or less untouched. The transhumanist utopianism, however, borrowing from the sci-fi imagination and literature, extended the reach of its interventions to the biogenetic processes as well, abolishing the classical utopian distinction between the two. And this precisely is what Sorgner himself tries to substantiate when he argues at length against Habermas: that the biogenetic (genetic enhancement) and the tradigenetic (enhancement through education) are interlinked and structurally analogous. One must conclude that Sorgner actually shares the fundamental anthropological assumption at the core of transhumanist utopianism, and only argues against it when the latter calls for interventions at the social-political level. It is now clear that Sorgner’s own transhumanist anti-utopianism is utopian when it comes to genetic enhancement, which would explain the head-on collision with Habermas’ position, which maintains the potential of tradigenetic utopianism while refusing the biogenetic utopianism. One could ask whether a presentist relativist like Sorgner is best equipped to even enter this polemic, which touches on more profound issues: the reversibility or irreversibility of the changes each enhancement technology presupposes, and the availability of tools to change the society if need be (utopias are indeed such a tool, and treating them as a taboo does not seem appropriate if one looks beyond the current contingent nodal point of political consensus).

### **What Kind of Political Thinking Inhabits Sorgner’s Book?**

So far, I have tried to make Sorgner’s text speak, against itself, about society, and I’ve done so by looking for the consequences of his own principled positions. I would now try and complete his views about society and politics (as the form of steering the evolution of society) by picking out what he does say about this subject matter in his latest book. I am only interested in getting a more complete and accurate form of the

missing discussion about society in his book and in the transhumanist community as a whole.

It is important to note that the core principle of social and political life is, for Sorgner, the negative freedom. He goes as far as to enlist the whole Enlightenment in its service, a hyperbole that isn't historically accurate (see, for instance, Israel 2011), but doesn't betray its meaning either. Negative freedom goes hand in hand with the alethic and ethical nihilism, which in the field of political thought might be translated as a liberal egalitarianism, since it negates the relevance of the moral value of individuals for the political or legal order. Instead of an universal common good, Sorgner uses the weak normative universalism of probable consensus: beyond all cultural and historical differences, he sees the "prolongation of human health span" (Sorgner 2022, 6, 7, 160) as a suitable candidate. This is just another facet of the marked individualism of his thought. His anti-utopianism and presentism alluding perhaps to the old discussion of the constructivist fallacy, and the meliorist convictions illustrated in the opening sections complete the picture of a rather classical liberal world view (compare with Gray 1986).

### **A Critique from Without**

The fact that Sorgner is a liberal is hardly surprising: all transhumanists are (Sorgner 2022, 19). Neither is his stance in favour of a (still limited) internet panopticon (Sorgner 2022, 37): panopticon is simply an instrument of governmentality that fits rather well historically in the liberal paradigm (Foucault 1995). What is surprising is how little else of substance is to be found in the book beyond these liberal convictions. One would really struggle to treat all its basic assumptions as anything else than another neat "philosophical" repackaging of the dominant world view of the current historical "contingent nodal point". The argumentation strategy of the book seems to be that the current state of affairs should allow for this or that particular evolution because it doesn't seem to threaten the status quo. Sorgner's thought is hopelessly locked in the prison of the philosophical image of the contemporary social world that he himself meticulously constructed.

### **A Critique from Within**

It might well be however that such a critique from outside would achieve little for those on the other side. This makes it as pointless as fruitless. Moreover, it will be of little help for thinkers like Sorgner, who is actively involved in a field that changes and evolves constantly. Therefore I go back to the roots of the self-inflicted societal blindness of transhumanism with the intention of showing that a serious transhumanist, an enlightened transhumanist, must and indeed can address the social world as part of a broader program of the “ontology of the present and of ourselves” that I presented as its maximalist programme.

This requires a return to the principle of alethic and ethical nihilism. As we have seen already, from this principled position, since there are no facts in a world of constant becoming, all judgements should be regarded as interpretations. This is the case even, or perhaps especially, for our judgements about the world, our philosophical judgements, including this form of perspectivism: they are all “contingent nodal points” (Sorgner 2022, 18). Now, the reconstruction of Sorgner’s ideas about the social world I attempted here seems to present us with a contradiction: on the one hand our ideas about society are “contingent nodal points”, subject to change just as our social reality is, but, on the other hand, it appears that the changes in the organization and structure of society must happen through means beyond our reach (Sorgner’s anti-utopianism sees the modern utopianism as taboo). Society, then, is simultaneously something humans create, an artefact, a second nature, and something humans should not try and rationally transform, but leave it somehow to its own devices to evolve, as if it was nature itself. Leaving aside the fact that there is hardly an aspect of natural reality left untouched by human technologies, Sorgner is ready to accept technical (*i.e.* rational) interventions at the most profound levels of our natural being, even influencing the natural reproduction of human individuals, but regards every intervention in the mechanisms of social reproduction of human individuals as an overreach of human reason.

I can see only one way one could argue for such a position: if one declares the evolution of human society as already consumed down to

its last moment. If the human society has reached its peak evolutionary point in this particular form, then every attempt to change it further could only lead us backwards. But this ideological and, indeed, evolutionary end of history described by Fukuyama (2006) is still not a fact, but an interpretation.

The point of my critique from within of the transhumanist thought and of Sorgner's book is exactly this: the nature of the contingent nodal points and their role in the larger mechanism of society. These contingent nodal points are not that contingent: every social organisation uses a wide range of tools to prolong the 'life' and to expand the reach of some contingent nodal points that are decisive for the preservation and reproduction of the same social organization and the forms of life within it. Education is just one of these tools I mention here because Sorgner seems to understand well its importance. Every dominant power structure can be said to try and maintain a certain ephemeral interpretative system beyond its logical or historical 'due date' because it serves the interests of its own self-preservation. I think this is also an idea Sorgner would be familiar with as a diligent reader of Nietzsche: one cannot treat ideas as something separate from power relations and interests.

Every transhumanist, then, every thinker preoccupied with our present and its potentialities, and interested in furthering the cause of freedom must start anew with this simple question: *cui prodest*? This opens up a hard but inevitable discussion about the responsibility for what is being thought and said.

### **What Society for Our Post-Human Future?**

To be sure, if there's something that we can count on it that our current world view and social organization will disappear. The utopian taboo is but a delay tactic, part of the wide-ranging strategies developed in our society to ensure its reproduction. Nothing good can come out of it, only stagnation. We can, and we must ask ourselves how to build a new society. Because, again, society is something that we build, and it preserves a certain rationality, like any other artefact, in every moment of its history. There is nothing inherently wrong with the fact that

societies from all epochs have developed mechanisms to ensure their survival over generations. But everywhere, in every tradition, there were ways to think critically about it, and to think beyond it, to develop new traditions and new societies. So, the question becomes: if all thinking is linked with interests, what interests does transhumanism align with, and what interest should it serve?

Is it possible to think outside power and interest structures? Is it possible to imagine and enact a different distribution of power, or to find another, more reasonable distribution matrix of interests? How about doing away with social power entirely by designing ways to sublimate it? What governmentality would enable us to go beyond the limitations of our current human condition?

There's so much to do, there are so many questions that won't go away if one ignores them, so much to understand about a society and a world that is already changing because of us, yet already without us (Anders 2002). It is incumbent upon all serious thinkers to break their allegiances and start working for the society of the future.

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