

HOW TO BE A BIOCONSERVATIVE TRANSHUMANIST

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Abstract

Stefan Sorgner's *We Have Always Been Cyborgs* is a more conservative book than it seems. It advances a bioconservative, *cishuman* approach to transhumanism that might have met the approval of Julian Huxley, who coined *transhumanism* in the 1950s, but would be seen as too limited by the people who revived the movement in the 1990s. In particular, Sorgner stresses the biomedical side over the artificial intelligence side of cyborgization. Indeed, his arguments tend to be dismissive of the latter's aspirations, which I argue is likely to put him on the wrong side of history, given how science and technology has radically reshaped our sense of both who we are and what is possible. In addition, Sorgner fails to take seriously the emergence of *cyborg rights* movement as a *posthumanist* phenomenon.

Keywords

Bioconservative, cishuman, cyborg, modality, transhumanism

Given the title and endorsements that precede Stefan Sorgner's (2022) latest book (by Katherine Hayles and Julian Savulescu), one might have reasonably expected a radical argument. On the contrary, the reader is presented with a relatively *bioconservative* case for a limited form of transhumanism. Maybe Sorgner thinks that this is how the debate should be pitched in today's world, a point to which I shall shortly return. In any case, by page eight, we learn that Sorgner adopts what I regard as a profoundly *cishuman* approach to transhumanism. For the past few years, I have been using the term *cishuman* to capture the idea that one's birth as a member of *Homo sapiens* is a necessary condition to qualify as human. The spirit of the term is meant to align with the critical coinage of *cisgender* by transgender activists (Fuller, 2019). And if *transhumanism* is about amplifying the distinctive positive features of humanity indefinitely—a point on which Sorgner and I seem to agree—then one can also speak of a *cishuman* approach to transhumanism. In that case, only certain upright apes are eligible to become transhuman. But Sorgner goes further. By quickly denying the

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plausibility of more radical transhumanist proposals to flourish indefinitely in some sort of digitally uploaded form, Sorgner also presumes that however *enhanced* transhumans may become, they will either remain *Homo sapiens* or become a *successor species* in some properly biological sense. Thus, the sorts of policies that Sorgner advances in the name of *morphological freedom*, the core normative principle of transhumanism, are all broadly biomedical, including the silicon chip implants that might turn us into the *cyborgs* suggested in the book's title.

Sorgner's vision aims to revive the spirit of Julian Huxley's original coinage of "transhumanism" in the 1950s to define a kind of *Eugenics 2.0* project, whereby our rapidly increasing knowledge of the relationship between genes and environment morally compels us to go beyond following evolution blindly to actively steering its future course. For this very reason, Huxley remains a somewhat problematic founding father, though like Sorgner I am also happy to embrace him. And while the early days of artificial intelligence coincided with those of the molecular revolution in biology, Huxley was clearly focused on the implications of the latter up to his death in 1975. Sorgner would also no doubt approve. Yet this orientation is very much *unlike* most of the people who reinvented the transhumanism brand in the 1990s. Ray Kurzweil, Max More and Martine Rothblatt were clearly thinking a lot—if not primarily, about the migration of humanity from carbon—to silicon-based platforms. For example, More's 1995 University of Southern California doctoral dissertation was on the fate of personal identity understood as the preservation of information in such a migration. Indeed, it is unlikely that *morphological freedom* would figure so prominently in the normative framework of contemporary transhumanism if the concepts of *human* and *transhuman* were as closely tied to biological embodiment as Sorgner supposes.

More charitably, one might see Sorgner's cishuman conception of transhumanism as a useful rhetorical construction to spend time—and pages—arguing against people who make explicit (e.g., *theologians*, Leon Kass) or implicit (e.g., Michael Sandel, Juergen Habermas) natural law-style arguments against transhumanist policies and associated research projects in stem cells, gene editing, neurotropics, etc. Here Sorgner understandably stresses his *naturalist* credentials, but that simply draws attention to the fact that transhumanism bears a complex relationship to naturalism. Naturalism as a metaphysical idea contains two somewhat countervailing tendencies: On the one hand, it emphasizes nature as the potential source of all beings; on the other hand, it emphasizes that all beings are limited in their potential. Taken together, these two tendencies exclude the need for a deity that inhabits a *supernatural* realm. For this reason, Spinoza is rightly seen as the first naturalist, at least in the modern sense, and his attempt to equate God and Nature (as such) was rightly seen by his contemporaries as subtly undermining the transcendent Abrahamic God. In this vein, Sorgner stresses that while humans can become much more than they currently are, there are limits to how much more they can become, given various physical, chemical and biological constraints. For Sorgner, this defines the space in which a *reasonable* transhumanism operates. But is it so reasonable?

Early in my career, I was swept up in the latest wave of naturalism, which made it seem metaphysically richer than its earlier incarnations. If one came of age

philosophically in the early 1980s, Quine, Sellars, Rorty, and the Churchlands appeared to be aligned with emerging deep readings of Hegel and Nietzsche as naturalists. In this context, the US Pragmatists provided a convenient meta-theoretical framework for making sense of it all. At the end of the '80s, I first proposed the idea of *reflexive naturalism*, whereby naturalists would effectively relativize their understanding of the world in a deep way (Fuller, 1989/1993, Chapter 3). It isn't that empirical inquiry gives us a better grasp of reality over time in some straightforward way, but rather this sense of progress is happening against the backdrop of changes to our sense of who we are and what we are inquiring about, which are equally products of that empirical inquiry. I took this to be the deepest philosophical lesson taught by the golden age of the "history and philosophy of science" in the 1960s and '70s, when Kuhn and Popper served as the polar dialectical attractors. In a nutshell, Kuhn showed that the meanings of even the most fundamental scientific terms can be radically shifted in response to new evidence, while Popper showed that the generation of such evidence is always available to scientists, if they are willing to take sufficient risks with what they currently take to be true.

My point here is that Sorgner would do well not to tie his naturalism to some static view of modality that is wedded to the current scientific consensus on, say, the long-term prognosis for life in the physical universe. The difference between what's *possible* and *impossible* has always been a shifting goalpost because the meanings of all the key terms have been up for grabs. Indeed, an honest audit of humanity's *progress*, scientific or otherwise, would be a critical history of modality. (Remind me to write it!) A striking feature about the greater publicity and interest in scientific matters in our times is that previously enshrined disciplinary boundaries are breaking down, with physicists such as Roger Penrose (1989) and Max Tegmark (2017) in rather different ways attempting to shift the goalpost regarding what counts as *consciousness* and *life*. Moreover, these views can acquire a credibility that they may have lacked in the past because frontline scientific research has increasingly shifted to computer modeling—even if, as in the case of Penrose, the scientist does not believe in the project of artificial intelligence (Horgan, 1996). Just as only the most radical science sceptic would nowadays maintain that a properly conducted experiment is a mere *metaphor* of what happens outside the laboratory, the same will soon extend to the computer simulations that test the speculations of the likes of Penrose and Tegmark. (Here Mark Zuckerberg's *Metaverse* should be seen as simply expediting the process.) Moreover, the tendency I'm describing is ultimately driven not by science's technological appurtenance but by the logic of scientific inquiry itself. After all, Francis Bacon's point in introducing the experimental method was that the normal course of things may represent a limited sense of what is and is not possible. It follows that those limits should be formally tested on a regular basis, since a shut door need not be locked, but it will seem that way if we don't try to find the right key.

Here Sorgner's argumentative strategy is reminiscent of philosophers who appealed to *ordinary usage* in the twentieth century to preempt the *meaningfulness* of concepts that scientists were trying to reshape in light of their research. In particular,

Sorgner thinks that the pervasive transhumanist appeal to *immortality* is merely metaphorical and perhaps related to the entrepreneurial interests of their exponents (Sorgner, 2022, p. 27). My guess is that Sorgner continues to treat immortality as a purely theological concept, even though it periodically resurfaces in modern secular science. Take two examples from the second half of the nineteenth century. First, Claude Bernard decisively revised medicine's goal as the conquest of death, not simply ushering people through various stages of the life cycle. It was predicated on a quasi-Cartesian view that the body might become a *perpetual motion machine*, if medicine became a properly experimental science devoted to indefinite physical improvement—and not the usual bedside Hippocratic therapy. Second, August Weismann, who is normally credited with having experimentally discredited Lamarck's theory of the inheritance of acquired traits, proposed that the *germ plasm* (i.e., the realm of genes) provides a materialist basis for immortality, in terms of which the *somatic* world (i.e., the realm of organisms) simply marks passing phases, a view that Richard Dawkins subsequently refined and updated as the *selfish gene* (Fuller, 2006, Chapter 11). A nineteenth-century version of Sorgner would have probably registered dismay at Bernard's and Weismann's *linguistic excesses*. In any case, the twenty-first century Sorgner that appears on these pages is tone deaf to these voices of the past that arguably inform contemporary transhumanism.

As becomes clear by chapter two, Sorgner's anti-silicon bias is motivated by his concern about an emerging panoptical form of governance that China is currently pioneering with its Social Credit System, whereby the consolidated forces of the state and business share personal data with an ease that is either outright prohibited or allowed only after highly labored negotiations in liberal democracies. As if to prepare the reader for a new Cold War, Sorgner suggests at one point that Europe should follow China's example and create a digital firewall, albeit one whose internal governance is—of course!—democratic (Sorgner, 2022, pp. 58-59). As the book's argument unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that Sorgner's ultimate objective is to reboot the European-style welfare state into a welfare superstate. To be sure, this project requires a massive compilation and processing of data comparable to China's, but its aim would not be social control but customized healthcare and a *decelerated* lifestyle, all transpiring in a cyberspace that also safeguards personal privacy. While Sorgner is certainly correct to see this goal as relatively non-utopian by transhumanist standards, the administrative sophistication that would be required to pull it off seems incredibly utopian. At least, Sorgner provides no clues about how it might happen. Revisiting the *Socialist Calculation Debate* of the 1920s and *Stafford Beer's Project Cybersyn* from the 1970s might help to develop his policy thinking (Steele, 1992; Medina, 2011).

Finally, let me return to the bioconservative cishuman cast of Sorgner's transhumanism. Just as Sorgner's cyborgs need to have begun life as *Homo sapiens*, they are not allowed to leave the species of their birth once they have become cyborgs. More to the point, Sorgner's cyborgs cannot renounce their humanity to such an extent that they self-identify more as posthuman than transhuman, where the former suggests that the locus of value, including personhood, is not the human but a more encompassing metaphysical category such as *animation*. To be sure,

starting on page 150, Sorgner briefly rehearses the arguments for posthuman personhood along the lines suggested by Peter Singer, whereby the capacity for suffering is determinative. Predictably, Sorgner concludes that while some animals may count as persons, some humans may not. However, he never seriously considers the ontological implications of a *Homo sapiens* transitioning into a robustly cyborg status, as in the case of Neil Harbisson, who has an antenna implanted in his skull that enables him to translate light waves into sound. Like many radical cyborg treatments, Harbisson's began to remedy a congenital disability. However, nowadays Harbisson is a synesthetic artist who campaigns for 'cyborg rights' as something distinct from human rights. Aleksandra Łukaszewicz (2021) has provided philosophical support for Harbisson's self-removal from humanity to a different category of personhood. Moreover, its philosophical roots reach back to the original response of the Cynics to the teachings of the established ancient Greek schools, a point revived and extended in recent years by one of Sorgner's self-professed role models, Peter Sloterdijk (1983/1987). Perhaps he should return to this work as well.

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