

THE WAY TRANSHUMANISM IS LEADING TO THE CONVERGENCE OF ALL SPHERES OF CREATIVE HUMAN THOUGHT

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Abstract

Although transhumanism accounts for the world in a non-dualistic way, this does mean that its prevalent ontological and epistemological position is moving away from traditional philosophical views. In his latest book *Philosophy of Posthuman Art*, the German philosopher Stefan Lorenz Sorgner also expresses this basic philosophical stance of non-dualism. For him, the time is coming for interpretations of world no longer based on division and boundaries, but on the processes of the converging interconnectedness. Namely, transhumanism affirms the idea that mutual efforts of all creative human activities (research, art etc.) are needed to transcend our current boundaries. Such efforts are associated with a greater likelihood of individuals enjoying a good life. In my contribution, I do not delve into the multitude of tangible expressive forms of posthuman arts (as Sorgner fully explains them in the book), but focus on a critical discussion of the more general epistemological, scientific and moral issues of transhumanism.

Keywords

Transhumanism, non-binarity, moral entrepreneurship, a good life, anticipatory governance

1. Introduction

Upon reading the last few books by Stefan Sorgner (Sorgner, 2022b; Sorgner, 2016/2020; Sorgner, 2018), not simply the most recent one *Philosophy of Posthuman Art* (Sorgner, 2022a), my initial impression was how important it is to know the intellectual discourses of the past if we are to understand the origin of the imaginations and visions of our future. Here, it becomes evident that when talking about transhumanism Sorgner has not been attracted to making speculations concerned with visions of the distant future and dealing with hype. On the contrary,

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he tries to re-think the entire spectrum of past and present intellectual factors, which are important by directing us to a future transhuman society in which human and non-human elements will converge intensively to create novel entities.

One of the main ideas in Sorgner's latest book is that the central shift in the transhumanist paradigm entails moving from a categorically dualistic ontology to a non-dualistic one. Donna Haraway already 30 years ago argued that the new technologies are accompanied by the erosion of many dualisms and binarities (Haraway, 1991). The posthuman paradigm is based on a non-dualistic ontology of permanent becoming. As described in the mentioned book (Sorgner, 2022a), this new non-dualistic ontology of permanent becoming also holds strong implications for post-human art: formal arrangements of posthuman artworks have already been established that affirm a notion of harmonious beauty where the cyborg features as a figure of ontological relevance in the arts, enabling us to reflect on the appropriate meaning of non-duality etc. It seems that this shift from a dualistic to a non-dualistic ontology has left strong traces in modern art and aesthetics. In every case, posthuman aesthetics and posthuman arts are moving away from the concepts of binarity and duality.

My critical comments on Sorgner's most recent book focus on general epistemological issues that arise in the relationships between art, science and religion in transhumanist thinking. I do not delve into the multitude of tangible expressive forms of posthuman arts that are otherwise well presented in his book. In the first section, I consider why transhumanism is moving away from the traditional dualistic ontology. In the second section, I ask why the transhumanist concepts of moral entrepreneurship and ableism are not in opposition to the idea of a good life, which is a central category in Sorgner's book. In the third section, I ask why in transhumanist policy visions it is important to arrive at a balance between the precautionary and proactionary principles. The fourth section concentrates on the intersection of art, religion and science in transhumanism, which is followed by brief remarks in the conclusion.

2. Transhumanism and the Non-binarity Paradigm

One of the core ideas in Sorgner's (2022a) book *Philosophy of Posthuman Art* is that all areas of modern art are built on non-dualistic ontological thinking. The non-dualistic ontology is becoming the central theoretical paradigm of modern, future-oriented art. We cannot overlook another characteristic of modern, future-oriented art, i.e., its link with science and technology. Many other authors have also concluded that the posthuman future is most creatively and artistically imagined through narratives and performance art that do away with human-machine boundaries, transform or eliminate the human body, and disengage reproduction and procreation from biology (Tirosch-Samuelsen & Hurlbut, 2016; Ginsberg et al., 2014).

Sorgner shows this creative approach to posthuman arts by referring to the artworks of Sven Helbig, Jaime del Val and Eduardo Kac. Their works may be seen as "non-totalitarian total works of art" (Sorgner, 2022a, p. 39), in which the categorical distinctions between art and technology are dissolved. If in ancient Greek the notion of *techne* stood for both art and technology, the humanistic tradition from

the Renaissance onwards separated art and technology. Art became a sensual representation of the non-empirical (*poiesis*), whereas technology was merely a means for realising immanent goals (*praxis*). Yet, with the rise of modern posthuman art the realms of art and technology were reunited. Sorgner also mentions Kevin Warwick, who is not simply an artist/media maker, but an engineer as well. The case of Kevin Warwick shows how close the relationship is between art and technology in posthuman art.

Today, the bioarts and cryptoarts are the most typical representatives of the paradigm shift to non-binarity. According to Sorgner (2022a),

bioart and cryptoart represent the process of art and technology dancing the twist. It is this fascinating event which is a central character trait of posthuman artworks. In the case of bioart, living entities get technologically altered. In the case of physical cryptoart, the boundaries of the physical and the digital become eroded. (p. 37)

We could mention many other cases, such as e.g. the prospect of living architecture in which organisms are embedded and, in some cases, mutually engineered and artificially constructed.

This transhumanistic shift from a dualistic to a non-dualistic ontology confronts us with a number of challenging philosophical and epistemological questions. Sorgner's profound and detailed elaboration of these meta-theoretical questions is proof that if we want to say something relevant about the future, we must first re-evaluate our past. Let us consider our ontological tradition! The dualistic ontological discourse was in prevalence for long time in the occidental philosophical tradition. When the new transhumanist perspective began to give weight to the category of "permanent becoming" (Sorgner, 2022a, p. 11), the various types of binarities that had characterised dualistic ontology (mind vs. body, nurture vs. nature, organic vs. inorganic etc.) started to lose the ground supporting them. Apart from the cases described in *Philosophy of Posthuman Art*, we can mention several other situations that indicate the current tendencies in philosophy and science to transcend the traditional dualistic ontological way of thinking. The dissolving of the strong ontological boundaries between humans, animals and machines may be expected in the new transhumanist perspective.

In Sorgner's transhumanist perspective, cyborgs best represent the dissolution of categorical ontological dualities which are paving the way in transhumanism. Namely, as Sorgner (2022a) states:

a cyborg is not just a hybrid in the sense that it is a mere mixture between two categorically separate substances (a material and an organic one), but it is a synthesis of elements which merely seem categorically distinct but are not so. (p. 24)

Despite Sorgner's articulate elaboration of issues connected with cyborgs, several doubts arise upon reading the above passage: if human beings have always been cyborgs, does that also mean that human beings have always been *integrated into* technology? Or does that simply mean that human beings have been *engaged with*

technology? The distinction between the categories of engagement with and integration into is thus relevant because not every type of engagement with technology, even an engagement that leads to an enhanced human lifestyle (e.g. technology implanted in the form of pacemaker) cannot be interpreted as the seamless integration of a human being with technology. Hence, in the case of an engagement with technology the function of the technologies is to maintain or mimic a certain function of our biological human entities. With respect to integration, two once-separated entities must become an inseparable whole.

The category of permanent becoming which is twisting ontological dualism impacts understanding of all other meta-theoretical and epistemological concepts. Let us consider the basic epistemological category of truth. In the humanistic tradition, the category of truth was entirely in the domain of reason (Livingston, 2015). Reason was firmly separated from the body. It was upheld that the real world is only accessible by reason. Unlike this traditional theory of truth, the posthuman concept of truth can only be pragmatic and fictive. In transhumanism, the correspondence theory of truth cannot be used because it is based on the assumption that there exists a correspondence of a word and a thing in the world. If things are permanently in a process of change in all respects, yet words are not, a plausible type of correspondence cannot then be meaningfully conceptualised.

It is easy to conclude while reading Sorgner's explanation of the category of truth that transhumanistic discourse highlights the complex epistemological categories in quite a unique way. Still, this does not mean that throughout the history of intellectual thought many other theories were not formed that interpreted basic epistemological issues in a similar way, even though they have nothing in common with transhumanism. In my view, the category of the verisimilitude of truth which has been elaborated in the context of critical rationalism is such a case, which in some cases is ironic (Mali, 2009). Karl Rajmund Popper, the well-known, 20th-century philosopher of critical rationalism, described the category of the verisimilitude of truth as a response to the traditional dualistic epistemology which strictly separated subject from object in processes of human cognition. Popper's starting-point assumption was that science is searching for truth, but might not know when this truth has been found. For him, the scientific method allows only a gradual approach to scientific truth. While this means that science has no absolute criterion of truth, it is nevertheless guided by the idea of truth as a regulative principle. It means that although there are no general criteria by which we can recognise truth (except tautological truth), there are milestones of progress towards the truth (Popper, 1963).

Sorgner deals with the distinction between critical posthumanism and transhumanism. Both paradigms are directed at posthuman conditions of life that destabilises the traditional views on the central role of *homo sapiens* in general. There is, however, a crucial distinction between the two paradigms. While in posthumanism human beings are seen as just one of many biological species embedded in spontaneous evolutionary processes, in trans-humanism *homo sapiens* is seen as a transient species being subjected to permanent transformation by way of newly emerging technologies. Sorgner's soft variant of the transhumanist view

prioritises the gradual transformation of homo sapiens. In this gradual transformation, homo sapiens will retain their characteristics of carbon-based entities, albeit it could have one or more traits which will move considerably beyond the traits living humans currently possess. It seems that Sorgner's theoretical position detracts from utopian ideas of radical forms of transhumanism. Still, Sorgner also does not show support for conservative bioethical statements. Conservative bioethicists see a threat to humankind in the progress made by any kind of newly emerging technologies. For example, in all of his last works Sorgner objects to the (precautionary) concerns of Jürgen Habermas, a representative of bioconservatism in Germany, for whom any kind of structural parallelism between parents (possibly) genetically modifying their children and traditionally educating them was morally unacceptable (Habermas, 2001). With the use of various practical illustrations, Sorgner argues that the structural analogy between *nature* (genetic) and *nurture* (education) is rational.

3. The Transhumanist Idea of a Human Good Life and the Role of Future-oriented Innovators

Generally speaking, Sorgner holds the position that in whichever direction future society is to turn, human sapiens will slowly lose many of the characteristics of the current biological species. The increasing technological possibilities will add to the likelihood of these transformations occurring. An important transhumanistic expectation is that visions and imaginaries will be established to help cope with a challenging future. Transhumanists therefore glorify future-oriented thinkers and innovators who are paving the way towards *unknown territories*, even when not all of the implications of tremendous scientific and technological progress are immediately identified. These future-oriented innovators are being treated as agents of the most radical technological progress. Here, I mention the concept of *moral entrepreneurship* elaborated by Steve Fuller (Fuller, 2010; Fuller, 2012) or *ableism* concept presented by Gregor Wolbring (Wolbring, 2008). Both authors are well-known transhumanists as well. As concerns an active and innovative stance against the future, both types of argument put forward by Steve Fuller and Gregor Wolbring sound convincing. For instance, Fuller's crucial message is that future-oriented innovators working in technological *niches* should be free as much as possible to use different instruments of enhancement to transform human cognitive and physical capabilities. Wolbring's central argument is that we end up being always already disabled as the norm of competent performance drifts upward. In this perspective, health will become a *positional good*, whereby our sense of well-being is tied directly to our comparative advantage vis-à-vis others.

Those who have bet everything on traditional bioethics may have serious hesitations when it comes to Fuller or Wolbring's concepts. There is nonetheless no doubt that in recent liberal and democratic societies in which progress towards newly emerging technologies is widely accepted that such disagreement with moral entrepreneurship and ableism is obsolete.

The concepts of moral entrepreneurship and ablism are not in opposition to the idea of a good life, a central category in Sorgner's theoretical considerations. More precisely, different concepts of a good life are being upheld among transhumanist thinkers who affirm the use of new technologies to extend humans' cognitive and physical capabilities. It is also true that although critics typically present transhumanism as a speculative and abstract ideology which refers to quite distant futures, several decades or even centuries away, most variants of transhumanism in recent times deal in quite a detailed way with very tangible issues like the question of how to detect the best ways to ensure a good life for a human.

In my view, transhumanism is a philosophy which seeks to elevate the idea of a good life for a human in connection with new scientific and technological progress. Transhumanism elevates social progress and de-emphasises social backwardness. Transhumanism wants to help by transcending social backwardness under the banner of scientific and technological progress. For a transhumanist, the rapid rate of scientific and technological progress is not stifling but is opening up avenues for social prosperity and human good life. Finally, humanity has in its history lived for too long in an atmosphere of "technological pessimism" (Drengson, 2010, p. 31). These pessimistic, even dystopian, technological views have in many cases spurred the rise of technophobia, a hate of technology which goes beyond any reasonable consideration of the social implications of technological progress. "Technophobia portrays technology as a growing monster of our making that will increasingly determine the course and content of our lives and sap what remains of our humanity" (Hanks, 2010, p. 3).

Sorgner locates the idea of a good life in the centre of his thinking. Although the German philosopher is very close to the idea of a good life as meaning the prolongation of the life span of good health (regarding which, by the way, there is nothing wrong), he emphasises in all of his works that the question of the pluralistic concept of a good life is relevant for every aspect of our lives—from personal to legal. Namely, a good life depends on strong desires and drives how the way of living a good life will be realised. The increased likelihood of persons living a good life is strongly connected with the human will to actively make progress with enhancement technologies. And it is these technologies that are able to transcend the current human boundaries.

Sorgner stands against any kind of realisation of a good life on the grounds of authoritarian or paternalistic approaches. He sees the only acceptable principles as being plurality and autonomy. With this idea of plurality, the German philosopher is thinking about the plurality of all of our psychophysiological needs and desires, best encapsulated in the proverb: don't put all your eggs in one basket. The responses given to the question of a good life are namely manifold. Or, as Sorgner (2022b) puts it in his book *We Have Always Been Cyborgs*:

The psychophysiological demands are responsible for what is needed for someone to live a good life, and these demands differ radically from person to person and from time to time, because they change during the various stages of life. (p. 136)

By autonomy, Sorgner is allowing for the possibility of people's autonomous choices in the event that no harm is done to anyone else when using the particular human enhancement technology. It is then highly questionable for him whether any kind of regulation concerning these newly emerging technologies (in the name of good life) is acceptable if it is not in tune with the basic guidelines of a liberal democratic society. Such guidelines start from the assumption that "(...) sanctions should occur only when harm is being done to a person" (Sorgner, 2022b, p. 43). That is, one person's freedom ends where the freedom of another person begins. Still, that does mean that any individual should have the right to act freely provided that no other individual is harmed because every person has idiosyncratic needs for realising a fulfilled good life.

4. Contradictions Between the Precautionary and Proactionary Principles

The idea of a good life presented in Sorgner's last few books also holds implications for the question of which types of current and future science and technology policy actions should be followed by the main political (social) actors. If the primary goal of the newly emerging technologies is to transcend current human boundaries, then the policy question of how to determine a balance between caution with and the progress of new technologies cannot be overlooked. Instead of far-flung future visions and speculative hype in which representatives of radical variants of transhumanism have sometimes been attracted to making, it is much more important to create policy actions which are able to compete with the progress of technologies for human enhancement in the near future. In other words: it is important to ensure that there is adequate short - and medium-term anticipatory governance of science and technology. Anticipatory governance may be understood as complex policy-based action with respect to a "distributed collection of social and epistemological capacities, such as future imagination and the disposition to learn from trial and error" (Barben et al., 2008, p. 992).

In the context of the anticipatory governance of new technologies, the polarisation between proponents of the precautionary principle and proponents of the proactionary principle is not very productive. While the precautionary principle sometimes too strongly emphasises circumspection and might even lead us to slow down or halt technological developments, in contrast the proactionary principle, which was introduced under the impact of strong technological optimism, is too often based on unconditional trust in the intrinsic value of technological progress. We require policy actors who are able to balance the proactionary and precautionary approaches and will have greater understanding of the need to include laymen in complex policy actions as well. It seems the latter aspect will not easy to ensure. The participation of the wider non-expert public in technology policies continues to be rare. There is a lack of new institutional mechanisms to help mobilise and involve a broad variety of stakeholders, bringing them together and facilitating sustainable and truly fruitful mutual communication with regard to visions for a future of technological progress (Mali, 2016).

Finally, if we ask what is the most promising technology able to realise a transhuman future and where are we today in terms of developing and utilising such technology, then the answer does not seem to be difficult. The most promising technologies for realising various transhuman goals these days are gene technologies, cyborg technologies and digital technologies. For example, in his latest book Sorgner (2022a) very spectacularly describes the ground-breaking character of gene technologies of the present:

In any case, modern gene technologies are altering living human entities or at least aspects of humans. This used to be a divine activity, a task which only God was able and allowed to do. Yet, given the latest technological developments, it is becoming an option for human beings, too. Humans forming other humans based on their own self-image. This reminds us of Prometheus, who as a titan is also subordinated to the father of all gods, Zeus. However, he does not accept this role, rebels against it, and creates humans on the basis of his own self-image, according to Goethe's drama entitled "Prometheus". Prometheus does not want to be anybody's slave. He is the autonomous subject taking responsibility for his own acts. This is what we are doing now. We are playing God in so far as we are doing something which only God was allowed to do, i.e., creating other human beings. However, we do not regard this as a sacrilege, but rather as corresponding to our being in the world. (pp. 34–35)

I fully agree with Sorgner's above assessment. Genetic science has made an important step further with its latest revolutionary discovery, i.e. the CRISPR-Cas9 technology. CRISPR-Cas9 technology is a genome-editing approach that is changing genetic science. As a genome-editing tool, it is reshaping the way scientists conduct research and is predicted to revolutionise not only the fields of medicine, biology, agriculture and industry but, much like all revolutionary technologies of the past, the way humans live. In more recent times, the popularity of this revolutionary technology has spread like wildfire (Mali, 2022; Mali, 2020).

The newest revolutionary progress made by genetic technology could very quickly cross the border between medical treatment and the enhancing of human capacities. The newly emerging technologies can lead not just to fighting disease but also to various kinds of human enhancement. The authors of *The Transhumanism Handbook* deal with various aspects of transhumanism and claim that to ensure that the concept of *human enhancement* remains useful, the basic definition should distinguish between ordinary improvements of human capacities (e.g. lifting weights) and more ethically troublesome human-enhancement technologies (Newton, 2019). Namely, for a radical group of transhumanist thinkers the ultimate aim of human enhancement is to achieve the power to imbue human bodies with superior physical and mental traits, the ability to live extremely long and, ultimately, to postpone death indefinitely. Sorgner certainly does not belong to this radical group of transhumanist thinkers. Here, we mention only his discussion about very disreputable idea of immortality, often (mis)used as a hallmark of transhumanism. For Sorgner, the idea

of immortality can arise in the best case only—as a rhetorical metaphor. He namely writes “... the concept of immortality implies either that humans cannot or that they must not die, therefore both options are absurd, if we think the world on a naturalist basis. We cannot even conceptualize immortality” (Sorgner, 2022b, p. 6).

In any case, human genome technologies like CRISPR-Cas9 are technologies that these days strongly inspire human expectations of a better life but while simultaneously bringing many new risks. These technologies are thereby becoming the biggest challenge of recent times.

5. The Intersection of Art, Religion and Science Through the Perspective of Transhumanism

As noted at the start of our discussion, Sorgner’s latest book convincingly shows that, instead of the traditional differentiation of art from science, today we encounter with the challenge of how to draw these two spheres of human consciousness together. Posthuman art is charting the course for the convergence and integration not only of art and science, but of all other spheres of human thought. In this framework, there is probably a need to understand why Sorgner does not agree with the rationalistic *taboos* ensuring that the epistemological issues of modern science are strictly separated from the traditional religious questions. These rationalistic taboos are most often epitomised in the idea that modern science was (is) exclusively limited to the materialistic world, contrary to religion which is exclusively oriented to transcendentalism.

In his latest book, Sorgner observes that the strict separation of science and religion overlooks the fact that both spheres of human thought have been continuously transforming throughout history. That is, while in the first wave of secularisation in the age of the Enlightenment the division into Christian religion and science became canonised, in these current times of a post-human paradigm shift, when the Christian religion can no longer see itself as possessing a categorically special ontological status in the world, it is increasingly pressured to emancipate itself from its traditional dogmas. Sorgner believes the modern Christian religion must become open itself to plurality and autonomy, which is a characteristic of modern transhumanistic thinking. It seems that underlying Sorgner’s new interpretation of the relationship between religion and science is his adherence to the more fundamental goal of changing the Christian god from an ontological to an anthropological category. Namely, he views the category of god in the posthuman projection as exclusively meaning an expression of human desires. If in the past the Christian religion was full of metaphysical, untouchable and unreachable god projections, then the new—if we can use such a term—*transhumanist god* must have the very opposite role and status.

Many other transhumanist thinkers are trying to put in a new light the meanings of the relationship between the traditional Christian religion and posthuman science. My view is that the intensive engagement of transhumanist thinkers with religion and onto-theology is legitimate. Hence, while questioning in which direction societal development will go and what will humans of the future be like, it would be short-

sighted to speculate on the basic onto-theological and ethical questions of the future without considering their adherents in the past (religion, philosophy, science etc.). For example, Steve Fuller stresses this fact strongly. For him, like the whole concept of modern science, the transhumanistic concept of science is heavily indebted to traditional Christian beliefs. As he has highlighted in various books, the origin of modern science in the 17th century in Europe was a natural successor of monotheistic theologies because reading of Bible was not reduced merely to a historical description but has been *literally* read as a dramatic paradigm (Fuller, 2010; Fuller, 2012). This latter reading should inhabit the *word of god* as we have been its authors rather than simply following it like children obeying their parents. With this new interpretation of theological truth, modern scientists have to a position of explaining the physical reality in terms of a set of overarching laws. It is interesting that Francis Bacon was the thinker who saw science and technology as so mutually connected. Bacon proposed that the divine plan be inscribed in two books, i.e. the Bible and in nature itself. The former declares what God intended, while the latter declares what God has actually produced.

In this new light, one can also promote the idea that human beings were created “in the image and likeness of God” and thus that they are capable of imposing intelligent design on the world. The final stage in this progress of human beings’ capabilities should be the paradigm shift to transhumanism. In the context of transhumanism, science does represent the culmination of theosis, i.e. a process “(...) by which we through continual transformation of world and self, we come to realise the divine potential of our being” (Fuller, 2012, p. 40). To conclude somewhat ironically, a very good indication of how far we as human beings have come and how far we still have to go is given by Yuval Noah Harari in the title of his book: *Homo Deus* (Harari, 2017).

We may conclude on the basis of Sorgner and Fuller’s interpretation of the modern science–traditional religion relationship that anywhere that technological transhumanism gestures toward a technological future it also reflects (by default) the longstanding historical nexus between religion and science. In transhumanism, where fixed identities cannot be defined, the boundaries between science and religion, between the profane and the sacred, and between transcendence and immanence must be enlightened in the new theoretical context.

6. Concluding Remark

The transhumanistic way of thinking is today triggering many new challenging questions, which are undoubtedly very strongly connected with the new understanding of the epistemological background of different types human consciousness, i.e. science, art, religion. In his latest book, one of Sorgner’s main points is his strong belief that the newly emerging science and technology need to find a new role also in postmodern works of art. In this way, it will be opening the way for (the further) dissolving of traditional dualistic ontologies. Sorgner presents several other characteristics of transhumanistic discourse. He not simply describe individual narratives from modern art, science and religion one after the other. He provides profound and in some places very provocative theoretical and

philosophical reflexivity which underpins these rich narratives and illustrations. That is the greatest value held by Sorgner's most recent book.

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