



Book review: Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, ed., *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction*

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This is a very timely book. As post- and transhumanism have become ever-hotter topics over the past decade or so, their boundaries have become muddled by misappropriations and misunderstandings of what defines them, and especially what distinguishes them from each other. This edition of essays by various experts, edited by Robert Ranisch and Stefan Sorgner, goes a long way to resolve these issues. The introductory essay by the two editors – both of whom are philosophers – is alone worth the book’s purchase price. They give a very straightforward and understandable synopsis of what defines posthumanism, transhumanism, and the posthuman; and they also give thumbnail sketches of the major differences between them. Basically, transhumanists believe in improving the human species by using any and every form of emerging technology. Technology is meant in the broad sense here: it includes everything from pharmaceuticals to digital technology, genetic modification to nanotechnology. The posthuman is the state that transhumans aspire to: a state in which our species is both morally and physically improved, and maybe immortal – a species improved to the point where we perhaps become a different (and thus “posthuman”) species altogether.

But, as Ranish and Sorgner discuss, this definition of the “posthuman” has been obfuscated by posthumanists, who actually have little in common with transhumanists except the belief that humanity is being irresistibly changed by emerging technology, that the “end of human beings” as we know them is at hand (17).¹ The key to understanding posthumanism, as the editors point out, is to break this word into its component parts: post and humanism; this elucidates the fact that posthumanism is of a more academic, philosophical, and political nature – and much less coherent as a school of thought than transhumanism. The only thing all posthumanists agree about is the death of humanism as a philosophical way of defining ourselves as a species, and a preoccupation with what kind of philosophical perspective can replace it.

The concept of humanism has ruled Western thought since the Renaissance, when lost Classical texts by Aristotle, Plato, and others were rediscovered via versions that had been preserved by the Byzantine

Empire and the Arabs. These texts had been lost to Europeans since the Dark Ages, during which time they had been destroyed because of widespread social chaos and violence. But during the fourteenth through the early sixteenth centuries, increased trade with the Middle East brought Europeans into renewed contact with many of these lost texts. They were then translated from Arabic and Greek into Latin and various other languages that made them available to Western Europe. This renewed access to Classical thought spurred an intellectual adventurism that, combined with novelties provided by mercantile and colonial ventures, helped redefine how Europeans saw themselves. It eventually led to new modes of inquiry (rationalism and empiricism), and especially to a view of humans as beings of limitless, godlike potential, as “the measure of all things,” as Ranisch and Sorgner remind us (16).

This viewpoint has until recently remained central to how Western culture has defined itself, and it has even been reinforced by the advance of technology and science, which seem to ratify the exceptional nature of humankind. But now, posthumanists argue, humanism is falling apart. They argue that it has been undermined by developments over the last fifty years or so that call into question human exceptionalism, such as the discovery of other habitable planets and of facts about animals that show them to be more complex than previously assumed, and the advent of ever more impressive Artificial Intelligence; also important are philosophical developments of the last hundred years or so that bring the elevated humanistic self-image down to earth, such as poststructuralism, deconstruction, feminism, postcolonial studies, Marxism, and Freudian psychology (14).

Ultimately, the editors of this edition believe the diffuse viewpoints of the posthumanists and their differences with transhumanists may be resolved if we view both groups in relation to the word “posthuman.” They assert that, “By being concerned with it’s [*sic*] meaning, members of both movements step outside of the limited borders of their own discourses and get acquainted with different perspectives” (15). In other words, the fact that both groups use the term “posthuman” highlights the fact that “both views have in common that they regard the humanist ‘human’ as outdated, be it in physiological [in the case of transhumanists] or conceptual terms [in the case of posthumanists]” (17). It is the fact that their volume focuses on these “connecting moments,” as well as the already clear differences between the two theoretical stances, that the editors see as the chief strength of this volume. I agree. But I see an even greater strength of this book as its wide range of perspectives on the two philosophies and their connections.

Indeed, the perspectives of this edition’s seventeen authors and its two editors are wide ranging; and they are also usefully organized. The book is divided into five sections, titled *Confessions*, *Lands of Cockayne*, *Neo-Socratic Reflections*, *Ontologies of Becoming*, and *Paragone of the Arts*. The first section, *Confessions*, contains four essays that give various historical perspectives on post- and transhumanism. Sorgner begins the section with his essay on the “philosophical pedigrees” of these viewpoints, arguing that they ultimately have more in common than most people acknowledge. Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan then delves into religion’s influence on the two standpoints, concluding that transhumanists in particular have so much in common with religion that they should redefine themselves as such. The essay that follows, by Trijsje Franssen, unfolds the Promethean dimensions of both trans- and posthumanism. Prometheus’ defiance of the gods is used by the posthumanists, she maintains, as an apt symbol of humanist arrogance and of their misguided human exceptionalism; on the other hand, the Titan is a positive symbol for the transhumanists, who point to his story as an inspirational one of overcoming limitations and of human progress. Finally in this section, Yunus Tuncel has a chapter on Nietzsche, whose criticism of humanism, Tuncel claims, is a model for posthumanists; they, like that German philosopher, doubt human rationality, subjectivity and consciousness. The author points to areas where Nietzsche’s thought diverges from transhumanists’, while maintaining that their notions of potential superhuman status for our species ultimately reflect his idea of the “superman.”

The next section of chapters, called *The Lands of Cockayne*, is named after a mythical medieval land of plenty where people's sole pastimes were eating, drinking and leisure. It is named such because its three chapters ponder various utopian – and dystopian – ideas connected with the post- and transhuman. The first and third chapters address utopian ideas directly: the first, by Michael Hauskeller, explicates how the roots of transhumanism lie in Utopia because this form of thought clearly has values and hopes that align with Thomas More's era, particularly Renaissance humanism. He goes on to contend that posthumanism also draws on Utopian ideals in its notions that emerging technology might spark a realignment of traditional power structures. Related to this, Sascha Dickel and Andreas Frewer's chapter "Life Extension" discusses how transhumanists' focus on life extension and immortality evinces a form of techno-utopianism. This vision is opposed, they maintain, by a countervailing "speculative posthumanism" that questions the modernist underpinnings of the transhumanist hopes, especially the validity of individualism and endless progress. The second chapter in this section, titled "Brave New World," interrogates how the novel by that name represents a critique of transhumanist notions. Curtis Carbonell argues in this chapter that the techno-paradise that *Brave New World's* leaders offer is nothing of the sort, and that this fact has been used by critics of transhumanism as a real, dystopic possibility for their dreams. Because the novel's representation of technological progress represents a critique of the dehumanizing effects of Americanization, Carbonell asserts, it also has posthumanist overtones.

The third section of the book, called *Neo-Socratic Reflections*, comprises two essays: one on politics and one on morality. James Hughes, the author of the first of these chapters, "Politics," begins his essay with a very useful discussion of the history of transhumanism and posthumanism, along with a description of their differences. This discussion gives more detail than, and different perspectives on, the introductory essay's similar discussion of these issues. Especially good is his detailed discussion of transhumanist politics, in which he presents a close look at just which kinds of items sit on their social agenda. Hughes concludes by noting the positive aspects of both philosophies and encourages a rapprochement between them. Robert Ranisch astutely claims in the second chapter of this section, called "Morality," that some transhumanist ideals are self-contradictory. In particular, transhumanists' strong belief in individual freedom with respect to reproduction and bodily alteration conflict with their ideal of perfecting the human species: after all, eugenics was born of the quest for human perfection, and that in turn is contrapuntal to individualism. Ranisch suggests that transhumanists' more careful consideration of the posthumanist arguments against human exceptionalism might reconcile this apparent contradiction, but he takes posthumanists to task for not doing more to fashion useful moral precepts.

Thomas Philbeck opens the section called *Ontologies of Becoming* with his appropriately titled essay "Ontology." In it he argues that transhumanism essentially replicates the mind-body dualism of Enlightenment humanism, which maintains the body is simply a meat-machine separate from the mind. As indications of this, he points to such things as the transhumanist belief in possibilities like uploading the mind into a robotic body. Posthumanists, he asserts, don't buy into this old paradigm, but they have "yet to figure out what a new paradigm might look like" (181). Nevertheless, he sees both systems of thought as ultimately positive because they acknowledge and struggle to make sense of "the continuing techno-social integration and its effect on society" (181).

In his chapter on "Nature" Martin Weiss discusses how several modern philosophers, Heidegger and Agamben, assess traditional definitions of human nature, then goes on to analyze how transhumanists propose the liberation of humans, via technology, from their biological constraints, and thus from essential natural limitations. He asserts that this project is humanist in form. He finishes by explaining how the transhumanists' desire to escape the limits of their bodies is seen by bioconservatives as a perversion of human nature, and thus why they want to ban human enhancement.

The third chapter of this section, titled “Evolution,” by Steve Fuller, uses Peter Singer and Ray Kurzweil – high-profile proponents of posthumanism and transhumanism, respectively – to demonstrate major differences between these philosophies. He does this by laying out how each of these men would answer questions specific to the idea of evolution and its related scientific underpinnings. He goes on to analyze how transhumanists’ and posthumanists’ leanings are exemplified by how they would react to certain aspects of evolutionary research: for instance, he maintains that transhumanists’ utilitarianism and drive for apotheosis would lead them to have little problem with using animals as subjects for cross-species research that would lead to hybrid entities; but posthumanists, because of their political bent against speciesism and anthropocentrism, would object.

Francesca Ferrando closes this section with her ruminations on “The Body.” Focusing on how science has altered definitions of the body, she elucidates how this, in turn, has shifted the concept of the “human” throughout history. She demonstrates this by using examples of how the human has been constructed in various, sometimes perverse ways by different cultures over time. For instance, she adduces the Nazis’ reconstruction of the Jews as “non-humans” in World War II, and the redefinitions of women and animals in the late twentieth century via the advent of feminism, eco-feminism, and the animal rights movement. She goes on to explain how post- and transhumanism have affected our definitions – and redefinitions – of the body in different ways: transhumanists see human bodies as apparatuses to be traded-in for better ones, or modified, whereas posthumanists see the body in more socio-political terms as integral to, and integrated with the world.

The last section of the book, *Paragone of the Arts*, has chapters on “Bioart,” “New Media Art,” “Literature,” “Science Fiction Literature,” “Movies,” and “Music.” In the first essay, Andy Miah gives a well-needed definition of bioart, disputes it, then looks at it from both the trans- and posthuman perspectives. In the process, he also delves into the work of major figures in bioart, such as Stelarc and Kac. In “New Media Art,” Evi Sampanikou digs into this topic’s history, especially as it pertains to the topics of the book. She assesses how, and how much, the philosophical positions of the post- and transhumanists are relevant to the evolution of this type of art. The chapters on literature and science fiction focus on a broad consideration of how the two beyond-humanisms are reflected in literature, in the first essay; and how science fiction in particular reflects specific cultural theorists of the postmodern era, such as Baudrillard, Deleuze, Hayles, and Haraway. Marcus Rokoff gives a useful historical survey of literature of the modern era that reflects post- and transhumanism, in the chapter called “Literature”; and Domna Pastourmatzi presents a profound and thoughtful essay regarding science fiction. Somewhat like Rokoff’s chapter, “Movies,” by Donal O’Mathuna, gives a useful survey of movies with post- and transhumanist themes. Stefan Sorgner’s chapter on music gives a surprising insight into how various musical works evince beyond-humanist themes. He points to operatic themes as examples, but even more convincingly points also to the various ways in which new technologies are used to compose musical pieces, suggesting Bjork and Kraftwerk as instances of this.

The one thing I would have liked to see here is better copy editing by the publisher; there were way too many grammatical infelicities. But this does not detract from the usefulness of the collection. Ultimately, it is very useful, and coming as it does just when the issues of post- and transhumanism are at a cultural crescendo, it should be a seminal tome for those who are interested in cultural theory, twenty-first century philosophy, technology’s effects on society, and the arts. I highly recommend it.

Note

1. All page references are to *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction*, ed. Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, Frankfurt am Main (et al.): Peter Lang, 2014.