



SEÇÃO ENTREVISTA

An interview with Stefan Lorenz Sorgner: a metahumanist philosopher

Uma entrevista com Stefan Lorenz Sorgner: um filósofo metahumanista

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Prof. Dr. Stefan Lorenz Sorgner combines two essential attributes: He is one of the brilliant minds of our times, and his specialization is on one of the most relevant discussions on philosophy, Trans/Post/Metahumanism. He received his BA from King's College/University of London (1997), his MA by thesis from the University of Durham, UK (1998), and his *Dr. Phil.* from the University of Jena, Germany (2009). In recent years, he taught at the University of Jena (Germany), University of Erfurt (Germany), University of Klagenfurt (Austria), Ewha Woman's University in Seoul (South Korea) and University of Erlangen-Nürnberg (Germany).

Currently, Professor Sorgner is a philosophy professor at John Cabot University in Rome and director and co-founder of the Beyond Humanism Network, Fellow at the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies (IEET), Research Fellow at the Ewha Institute for the Humanities at Ewha Woman's University in Seoul and Visiting Fellow at the Ethics Centre of the Friedrich-Schiller-University in Jena. Besides, he is Editor-in-Chief and Founding Editor of the *Journal of Posthuman Studies*. His curriculum is profoundly dense and impressive.²

In 2009, you published an article named *Nietzsche, the Overhuman, and Transhumanism*. In this article, you argue that Nietzsche was a vital ancestor to the Transhumanist movement (contrary to what professor Nick Bostrom wrote). You claim, furthermore, that Nietzsche's work is useful as a supplement to Transhumanism in that it gives us the best reason to be transhumanists compared to those currently present in the transhumanist discourse – especially because the Nietzschean reflections on the meaning and value in the scientific age. However, when we analyze the distinctions between the movements of Posthumanism and Transhumanism, we noted that while the first is connected with postmodernism, the second has to do with Humanism. Thus, there



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would be a contradiction to consider Nietzsche as an ancestor of the Transhumanism, being this movement a Neohumanism?

The issue you are raising is an important one indeed. Several different aspects need to be considered. Firstly, a wide and a narrow understanding of transhumanism can be distinguished. The wide understanding of transhumanism includes a description of qualities to which all transhumanists subscribe to, but it does not include a judgement on ontological issues, which, however, is contained in the narrow understanding of transhumanism. The central aspect which is characteristic for transhumanism is positivity concerning technologies. Being a transhumanist, you must regard the use of technologies for improving the quality of life of persons by radically moving beyond their current limitations as beneficial. Thereby, the likelihood of the coming about of the posthuman is increased. Who the posthuman is, which technologies are being regarded as most promising and whether a libertarian or a social, liberal democratic system represents the best possible political system for achieving this goal are some of the questions with which transhumanists are concerned. Positivity concerning the use of technologies is an attitude which is not necessarily connected to any ontology. Christians can hold it in the same way as atheists. This brings us to the narrower understanding of transhumanism. In contrast to the wide understanding, it encompasses an ontological dimension, as empirical surveys, e.g. on the IEET website, have confirmed that most transhumanists are naturalists, which limits the existence of entities solely to whatever is empirically accessible. When the relationship between humanism and transhumanism is being discussed, the definition of transhumanism becomes relevant.

Furthermore, there has been a lack of reflection on the meaning of humanism among those who see transhumanism as a continuation of humanism. There are as many understandings of humanism as there are scholars, but when it comes to the issue in question, two different understandings of humanism are prominent. Again it comes down to

the question of the relevance of the ontological dimension. Should humanism solely be associated with the affirmation of the use of reason or should it be associated with the use of a specific ontological understanding of reason, namely a non-naturalist understanding of reason? This is the crucial issue. Are La Mettrie, and Nietzsche or Descartes, and Kant representative of the humanism which we take into consideration here? Descartes and Kant identified reason with an immaterial substance. According to Nietzsche reason is the result of evolutionary naturalist processes. What are the implications for the question concerning the relationship between humanism and transhumanism?

If humanism is simply an affirmation of the use of reason, then transhumanism can be seen as the continuation of humanism, maybe even a hyper-humanism, as reason, engineering as well as the sciences ought to be used for developing technologies for improving the quality of personal lives. However, if we refer to the narrower definition of transhumanism, also consider the ontological aspect of reason, and hold that Descartes and Kant best represent the humanist condition, then we have to come to a different conclusion, as humanism affirms the use of a non-naturalist concept of reason whereas transhumanists affirm the use of a naturalist account of reason. In this case, transhumanism could not be conceptualized as a type of hyper-humanism. I subscribe to this analysis of the relationship between humanism and transhumanism, as transhumanism originated with an article by Julian Huxley in 1951, and Julian Huxley took evolution and naturalism seriously.

Nietzsche, on the other hand, was the first to realize the hermeneutic circle between naturalism and perspectivism, which is the epistemological theory that all philosophical judgements are interpretations. If you are a naturalist, it is highly implausible to affirm a correspondence theory of truth. A non-naive naturalism implies perspectivism, and perspectivism can best be made plausible on the ontological grounding of naturalism. Hence, the hostility between postmodern thinkers and naturalists reveals a lack of reflective philosophical capacities. I have already dealt with this insight in

the monograph "Metaphysics without Truth" which came out with Marquette University Press in 2007.

You and Jaime del Val proposed in 2010 the Metahumanism, a new intellectual current. On the 2nd and 3rd of July occurred the 1st Beyond Humanism Forum Post-Trans-Metahumanist: Exchanges in Times of COVID-19 & the 10th Anniversary of the Metahumanist Manifesto. Could you tell us more about this current and the differences between Metahumanism and both Transhumanism and Post-humanism?

Metahumanism is an approach which rests on the guiding principles of the manifesto. Jaime del Val and I differ with respect to how we explain the relationship of meta- to trans- and posthumanism. Jaime del Val identifies transhumanism with hyperhumanism, which is the reason why he sees many tensions between meta- and transhumanism. I, on the other hand, identify transhumanism with a movement away from humanism, as I explained in more detail in my former answer. I take the notion of "meta" seriously, as the Ancient Greek "meta" both means "beyond" as well as "in between". Hence, metahumanism lies beyond humanism, which is founded in an ontological duality between the material and the immaterial, but also in between trans- and posthumanism. Transhumanism affirms positivity concerning the use of technologies as well as a naturalist ontology. Critical posthumanism stands for perspectivism, as well as the affirmation of non-duality concerning nature and technology. I highlight that transhumanists and critical posthumanists do not recognize sufficiently, how similar their approaches are. In the same way, as there is a hermeneutic circle between naturalism and perspectivism, trans- and critical posthumanism stand in a structurally analogous relationship. Hence, metahumanism is the approach which comes about, if trans- and critical posthumanists learn to think philosophically.

You told us that you are working on a detailed study entitled *Philosophical Transhumanism*. We are dying to know about this. Would you

like to anticipate some aspects of your research? (Could it be a reply to Professor Francesca Ferrando's book *Philosophical Posthumanism*?)

The majority of intellectuals who self-identify as transhumanists as well as critical posthumanists were not philosophers by training. If they had studied philosophy, they were mostly concerned with the analytical tradition. Having studied in the UK as well as in Germany, and having undergone both an analytical as well as a continental training, I intend to raise the level of complexity of philosophical reflections on transhumanism. So far, transhumanism has been dominated by scientists, engineers, and computer experts, and many transhumanists rather see themselves as PR intellectuals rather than critical thinkers.

Francesca Ferrando's monograph "Philosophical Posthumanism" intends to raise the level of complexity of philosophical reflections when it comes to critical posthumanism. My own monograph intends to do the same with respect to transhumanism. Thereby, my main focus are digital (raising doubt concerning mind-uploading; rethinking the meaning and relevance of digital data) as well as gene technologies (gene modification and traditional education as structurally analogous procedures; selection of fertilized eggs after IVF and PGD as structurally analogous procedures), as I regard them as most significant for promoting transhumanist' goals. Furthermore, I explain my philosophical take which is a hermeneutic transhumanism, which leads to a fictive ethics, i.e. norms and values cannot claim any epistemological superiority, but they are contingent nodal points which are the result of power struggles. My own approach argues that suffering is morally relevant, radical plurality is a wonderful achievement, which always needs to be considered, and that the personal freedom ends when harm gets done directly to another person, whereby the concept of person gets rethought as a hierarchical one, depending on the capacity of suffering of an entity, which needs to be analyzed empirically eventually.

You wrote a paper named *Philosophy as Intellectual War of Values*, published in the book *Philosophy's Future: the problem of philosophical progress*. In your article, you stated that philosophy could have a future only by way of perspectivism/naturalism. Recently, a crime shocked our society: a 10-year-old child became pregnant after four years of sexual abuse by heuncle. In Brazil, abortion is not forbidden in cases of rape. A reactionary religious group tried to avert the legal abortion by rallying in front of the hospital. Even in crystal clear cases like this, where almost everyone could understand why abortion should be legal, at least in some instances, this is not yet the case. We see, nowadays, anti-intellectual movements and many people defending flat land theory, that China created the Covid-19 virus and many who deny the environmental crisis. Taking this into consideration, how can a philosophy of perspectivism help us?

Making the claim that personhood and the moral demand not to directly harm another person are contingent nodal points does not mean that these claims should not be effective. They lack epistemological superiority, but I and luckily many people today regard them as plausible. We hold on to these moral demands, and fight for them. Going against morality does not lead you to being punished in the afterlife, but makes you confront sanctions in this world, be it social, institutional or legal sanctions. If we want certain things to change, then we need to fight for them. We need to become active. We need to form alliances to bring about changes.

So what about the case of abortion? Suffering is morally relevant. Embryos neither possess a nervous system nor a sufficiently developed brain for experiencing suffering. If an entity does not experience pain, then it ought not be considered morally, as there is no moral reason for us doing so. This is not a universally valid insight. However, this is a moral narrative which many people find plausible. It is a narrative I present. In order for it to be effective, alliances need to be realized so that such insights can be appropriately considered in

laws. Even if we lack the claim that a moral insight is eternally valid, this does not mean that it is implausible, or that it cannot be effective in the lifeworld.

Actually, I regard it to be a strength that a moral insight is merely a contingent nodal point, as it reduces the violence which goes along with the sacred, the necessary, the valid. Embracing a fictive ethics leads to openness towards others. It is easier to enter into a dialogue, and you have a much less violent stance, if you regard fictive ethics as plausible.

What about anti-science or anti-intellectual movements? Perspectivism does not justify an anti-intellectual or an anti-scientific approach. Actually, in many cases it is easy to spot a performative self-contradiction among anti-science postmoderns e.g. if they get on a plane while defending an anti-scientific stance; if they truly doubted the pragmatic reliability of science, they could not justify taking a plane themselves. Perspectivism merely claims that the sciences cannot provide us with a truth in correspondence with the world. However, science can provide us with pragmatic truths. If you repeat a specific experiment, and you find out a specific correlation occurs in most of the cases, then this is a reliable scientific insight. Science can provide us with pragmatically reliable judgements. However, it cannot tell us whether a materialist, an idealist or psychophysiological ontology of permanent becoming ought to be embraced, as this concerns a knowledge which lies outside the scope of what empirical scientific endeavors can realize.

Similar reflections can apply to the case of anti-intellectualism. Doubting the universal validity of intellectual judgements does not imply that intellectual judgements should not be relied upon. Given an evolutionary understanding of human beings, intellect is a capacity which also came about as part of evolutionary developments. Intellect came about, as it was useful to us in some way. It provides us with insights which enable us to survive, get stronger, or help us to have a good time. Intellect might not be able to grant us an insight into the ontological foundation of the world, but if it provides us with pragmatically reliable insights, it is in our interest to usually use intellect.

These reflections show that scholars, who infer from perspectivism an anti-scientific stance, an anti-intellectual approach or a moral arbitrariness, have not reflected sufficiently on the meaning of perspectivism. The relevance of moral judgments can be explained, and anti-intellectual as well as anti-scientific approaches can be refuted on the basis of perspectivism. In addition, there is a specific strength which goes along with perspectivism, as it leads to a reduced inclination to take a violent stance concerning people who take a different approach. This is an attitude which I regard as extremely important, given the violent, and dangerous rigidity of fundamental religious, nationalistic, and authoritarian approaches. A pluralistic liberal democratic society would benefit significantly, if a weaker stance concerning moral judgements was widely shared, as thereby the violence against others could significantly be reduced.

Returning to the previous question, let us talk a bit now about post-truth, one of the most nefarious problems to democracy. Would post-truth be a symptom of philosophy's sickness? How could we understand – and perhaps solve – this issue through perspectivism?

Truth is such a big word in philosophy. However, philosophy should not be translated as the love of the truth, but rather as the love of wisdom. Thinkers used to refer to themselves as sophos, as wise human beings. Eventually, Pythagoras came and coined the term "philosophers", lovers of wisdom. Wisdom is not concerned with truth but with personal flourishing. How can we live good, fulfilled and flourishing lives? The highest form in Plato's philosophy was the form of the good. Nietzsche stressed that the earth turns around creators of new values. The question of the good is the central philosophical issue.

If the world is in permanent becoming in all respects, how can any judgement correspond to the world? A judgement consists of words which do not change, but all entities in the world are permanently changing. We need to clarify what we mean by truth. If the world is in permanent

becoming in all respects, it might be impossible to meaningfully apply the correspondence theory of truth. A pragmatic concept of truth might still be applicable. Perspectivism which stresses that all philosophical judgements are interpretations does not imply that an interpretation is a false statement. It merely stresses that any philosophical judgement can be false, not that it has to be false. However, has any philosophical judgement ever proven to be true?

What is important when we deal with philosophy are real life issues, and not necessarily the truth in correspondence with the world. If we are merely entities who have come about as a consequence of evolutionary processes, why should we be concerned with truth for the truth's sake? What if truth for the truth's sake leads to suffering or extinction? It cannot be guaranteed that truth, beauty, and goodness necessarily need to be identified.

We are struggling entities, struggling to survive, to gain power, and to have a good time. Truth for the sake of truth is not what we are after. Hence, we need to bear in mind that philosophy has to do with wisdom, with how to lead our lives, and with the question of the good. This is what we are doing, if we deal with the wide range of philosophical issues with which trans-, meta-, and critical posthumanist thinkers are concerned. This is also the reason why these posthuman issues are existentially important for me.

We are living in a pandemic crisis. What lessons can we learn from its impacts? What kind of response could Trans/Post/Metahumanism offer?

I think we urgently need to rethink the meaning of digital data, as we are in a war for digital data. In the USA, digital data is primarily being collected by big companies. However, they rely on what we give to them as well as what they can get hold of as a consequence of trading digital data with other companies and institutions. China, in the meantime, has developed a far more efficient way of collecting digital data. They turn it into a political obligation, and they thereby have the potential of getting hold of much more data than any other country. In addition,

they alter the structure of the internet by means of their policies. They turn the global internet into a local system, as they have access to the data of the internet in non-Chinese countries, but also have exclusive access to the data in China, which other countries or companies do not possess, if they do not subscribe to the Chinese laws. Chinese data is local, while the rest of the internet is global, besides the net in North Korea maybe.

Many economists claim that data is the new oil. While oil is a natural substance, but data is intellectual property, it is wrong to simply identify data with oil. However, it needs to be acknowledged that both entities are connected with power. The more digital data gets produced as a consequence of the increased digitalization, automation, and coming about of smart cities, and the internet-of-things, the more important it gets, as by means of data analysis we can realize significant correlations. These correlations are essential when it comes to political decision-making procedures, research in the social and natural sciences, the development of new technologies, or the realization of medical insights and treatments. No aspect of the lifeworld remains untouched as a consequence of digitalization. Those, who manage to get hold of the data, and realize the correlations, have the best starting point for economic flourishing. Given the current structures, one can wonder what could prevent China from turning into the economically leading nation in the near future. It is already the case that Chinese scientists have overtaken US scholars concerning the quantity of papers which they manage to publish in peer-reviewed journals per year.

Digitalization of the lifeworld also implies that we get upgraded by means of RFID chips which wander into several parts of our bodies so that they can analyze our bodily functions. A predictive maintenance of our health can be realized in this manner. We can be warned of us getting ill, while all our bodily functions are still working properly, in the same way as predictive maintenance works in machines. Sensors tell us that a specific part needs to be replaced, as it can be expected to malfunction in the foreseeable future given the available data.

If we had sensors in our bodies which permanently survey our bodily functions, an internet of bodily things, we could realize which alterations go along with being covid positive, too. In this way, positives could be identified and isolated much faster, in order to reduce the spread of the virus. By means of upgrading and permanently surveying bodily functions by means of RFID chips, a reliable way of ending the pandemic could be realized. However, this procedure presumes that chipping human beings becomes legally obligatory. Instead of being forced to carry your passport with you, you merely need a chip. In Sweden, initial steps have been taken towards such a future, as citizens can decide to be chipped as a way of receiving a passport. This leads to an enormous amount of social challenges; however, I think that the benefits outweigh the dangers which go along with it, if we permanently remind ourselves what a wonderful achievement it is to live in a society in which negative freedom, the absence of constraint takes a central role. Negative freedom does not imply that anything goes, as the freedom of a person ends when the person wishes to actively harm another person, and on the basis of this logic, it can be argued that vaccinations or the chipping of humans can become a legally obligatory procedure.

In your recently published article, *What does it mean to harm a person*, you analyzed how our most potent ethical theories, from deontological to Singer's utilitarianism, cannot deal satisfyingly with the newest ethical challenges, for instance, what is the moral status of an AI. Although you made some remarks about the limits of Singer's ethics, you keep suffering as a plausible criterion. However, one of the Trans/Post/Metahumanist preoccupations is ecological devastation. How can we attribute moral status to forests, trees or insects? Can we justify why we cannot destroy forest or non-sentient lives without appealing to anthropocentric reasons?

This is a tricky challenge indeed. Critical posthumanists take a relational ethical approach,

but I regard this as highly dangerous, as it has paternalistic implications. Let me briefly explain this by reference to an example. A relational ethics implies that your obligations depend on your relationalities. In China, a relational ethics is dominant, as traditional Chinese religious approaches were relational, too. Your duties are the result of which role in a family, a city or an institution, you have. It was recently the case that a Chinese teenager passed the entrance exam to a university. However, he was not allowed to start studying there, as his dad had a massive debt which he did not pay back. The immoral behavior of the dad had consequences for other members of the family, here the son who wanted to study. The son did not do anything wrong, but nevertheless he was punished, as his dad failed to undertake his obligations. This clearly shows the paternalistic implications of a relational ethical approach, which I regard as highly dangerous. With an awareness of the terrible paternalistic structures of the so called "Third Reich", I am convinced that everything must be done to avoid the coming about of such frightening paternalistic political structures. Relational ethical approaches have such dangerous implications. I regard individual personal freedom as a wonderful achievement which must not be undermined.

There are critical posthumanist approaches who argue that it would be best, if humans died out. There are other such approaches which demand that human existence on earth must be regulated such that the relational complex of the earth lives in an appropriately attuned order. This, however, demands that eugenic practices need to be implemented, which forbid people to procreate other people. This undermines the wonderful achievement of negative freedom for which we have been fighting for on various levels during the enlightenment process. Scientists, intellectuals, as well as the wider public have fought for their right to live in accordance with their idiosyncratic wishes, longings and desires, and I regard plurality and negative freedom as a wonderful achievements, I am happy that this insight is widely shared today. If you start from this insight, however, then it can

be more problematic to deal with some global challenges like climate change.

Instead of the demand to introduce new eugenic laws concerning procreation or to get rid of human beings or to return to a natural world before the time during which evil technologies have destroyed our harmonious relationship with nature, we desperately need to focus on technological solutions for the various issues which can be associated with climate change, e.g. in-vitro-meat, roofs made out of solar panels, real vegan cheese on the basis of gene edited yeast, new architectural solutions for physical, biological, economic, and social conditions for successful and productive agriculture solutions in urban environments, e.g. Plantagon, and new ways of transportation which is better for the environment, like Hyperloop. This is where the real challenges lie. Instead of wondering whether we already live in a computer simulation or arguing about how many angels fit onto the tip of a needles, we need to deal with practical real life challenges.

Why should we do so? I think the answer has to be a personcentric one. It matters to persons, where they live and which report they have with the environment. It is not the case that there is a categorical ontological difference between persons and the environment, but suffering matters. Using precious soil for digital technologies does not harm the soil. It has consequences for persons. Forests matter, because they are relevant for persons, whereby the notion of a person should not be an anthropocentric one. The concept of a person should be a hierarchical one, and should depend on the capacity of suffering of entities, as suffering is morally relevant, whereby we need to develop an empirical means for realizing the intensity of suffering of an entity to develop a reliable way of determining personhood. This might not be an approach which is satisfactory in all circumstances, but it is an as-good-as-it-gets ethics, and this is all I am trying to present. If the contingent nodal points, which we stick to, are not plausible anymore, we need to develop new ones.

Political and social institutions are relevant for taking care of a sustainable existence for persons.

These are the institutions which are responsible for making policy decisions concerning such critical issues like climate change. Furthermore, personal actions get altered, if they move away from a self-understanding that they are the co-creation of creation, they are the only entities in whom God's divine sparks exists. By embracing a more humble self-understanding, on the basis of which we see ourselves as merely gradually different from all other living entities, we can also alter the way we act. There is not only one golden solution by means of which we can deal with tricky global issues such as climate change. As good-as-it-gets-solutions are what we should aim for. However, a non-dualistic relational understanding of the world definitely supports measures for realizing paradigm-shifts with respect to providing the background for a sustainable personal flourishing. We are already on the right track. I can hardly wait for our posthuman future to occur.

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