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Boundary Work: Post- and Transhumanism, *Part I*
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Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction
Edited by Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner
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313 pp.

Ranisch and Sorgner's *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction* (2014) sets out to explore the connecting and diverging factors of transhumanism and posthumanism at a time of marked ambivalence towards the nature and status of humanity. Amidst a growing body of work concerned with examining each of the named movements respectively, this volume's self-announced distinctiveness comes from it's attempt to creatively juxtapose the two with regard to *common foundations, topics, and sources of influences* (18).

To this end, the text comprises 5 thematically organised sections each corresponding with some particular topical aspect broadly situated under the generic heading of contemporary *"beyond humanism"* debates. Despite being an ambitious undertaking, which no doubt raises more questions than it definitively answers, on the whole this volume amounts to a greatly informative and refreshingly accessible point of reference likely to enhance future discourse. Among the book's most commendable strengths are its opening chapter which nicely streamlines key points of discussion for a non-specialist readership, as well as the frequent far-sighted moments inviting meaningful reflection that appear scattered throughout. While it is impractical to remark upon the great breadth of constituent scholarship under the limited parameters of this review, three distinct facets of the work strike me as particularly deserving of attention. These are, in order of appearance: *Introducting Post- and Transhumanism* by Ranisch and Sorgner, *Politics* by James Hughes and *The Body* by Francesca Ferrando.

Attention to Post- and Transhumanism

The lead editors open with a concise and well-structured introduction recognising the considerable academic and popular attention given to trans- and posthumanism in recent years, while equally acknowledging an apparently widespread conceptual confusion that continues to surround the terms. An initial sketch of both concepts presented here notably characterises transhumanism as a *'more or less coherent'* set of techno-optimist ideas, whereas by contrast posthumanism is suggested to stand as a *'highly ambiguous notion'* at best demarcated by its principle break with humanism.

While transhumanism is generally considered an intensification of Enlightenment humanist thought, guided by a belief in reason, individualism, science, progress, as well as self-perfection or cultivation, posthumanism has emerged as a popular umbrella term typically used in reference to an eclectic variety of perspectives that together reject humanisms basic concepts and values. Such discontent no doubt comes following the multiple decenterings sustained over the last some half millennia courtesy of Copernicus, Darwin and Freud, who each in their own way contributed toward laying bare the

ideologically loaded foundations of the Western humanist tradition.

To be sure, Ranisch and Sorgner recognise much ink has already been spilled by feminists, postcolonial theorists and other postmodern theorists dismantling the deep-seeded binaries and power-wielding dualities so persistently ingrained within Western culture over the course of human history. Correspondingly, it is fair to say posthumanists have tended to be motivated by a desire to create significant distance from the seemingly unjust anthropocentric privileging, exclusionary politics and violent subjugation of non-human others historically proliferated under the name of humanism. Crucially, however, if predicated on condemnatory grounds alone, then posthumanism appears held together by a mutual disaffection for humanity's past more so than any clearly defined alternative vision for the future. To muddy the waters further still, the authors' recognise how posthumanism sometimes gets used in a broad sense that encompasses transhumanism as a type of *technological* posthumanism. Understandably, these basic programmatic ambiguities along with overlapping interests and concerns has led to much uncertainty around the relationship between the two movements.

Ultimately then, although there isn't a commonly held notion of what posthumans are—nor the form of epochal shift necessary to achieve a substantive distinction from the transhuman—Ranisch and Sorgner resolve that under both philosophical approaches the *'human being'* is fundamentally questioned through engagement and interaction with technology. To establish commonality the authors recognise how trans- and posthumanism equally imagine conventional understandings of *'the human'* to be outdated (in either chiefly physiological or conceptual terms) whilst sharing an interest in human *co-evolution* with emerging technologies.

Within posthumanism the motif of 'the posthuman' is evoked to signify a replacement of the human with some new narrative free from the false assumptions of it's predecessor, whereas by contrast in transhumanism human-technological coupling is considered instrumental to bring about a radically enhanced human being. Perhaps not surprisingly, these contrasting value-orientations apparently translate into quite distinctive modes of articulation within the relevent discussions, with it suggested: '*Posthumanists employ a more metaphorical, artistic, dialectical and literary style, while transhumanists are much more closely associated with a linear, analytic and pragmatic way of thinking and expressing themselves'* (17). On these grounds, the authors speculate mutual misunderstandings could perhaps be related to the difference of style favoured by both traditions.

To round off their introduction Ranisch and Sorgner surmise that since liberating human beings appears to be the main objective of both posthumanism and transhumanism, the two approaches likely have much to learn from each other. It seems reasonable to suggest that given their mutual ambition to move *'beyond humanism'* and a shared concern for how technology specifically may contribute toward this process, the sharp line often drawn between the movements could turn out be less substantial than typically imagined. Nevertheless, when met with this obvious temptation to conflate the two together, a significant obstacle that should to be taken into account is the clearly contrasting normative standpoints generally assumed by thinkers on either side of the fence.

The authors draw our attention to the fact that despite emancipatory impulses and political statements arising within posthumanist discourse—such as feminist positions, or the attempt to transcend anthropocentric views and speciesism—in most cases the normative dimension of posthumanism tends to be stressed in a critical manner rather than an explicitly affirmative one. From this starting point we can infer the communities could move to benefit each another by entering into more focused discussions around the type of future we wish to create, if not coming together to build progressive political alliances in arenas where complementary relationships appear most feasible.

Post- and Transhuman Politics

One contributor who takes the above point seriously is American Sociologist and Bioethicist James Hughes in his chapter titled *Politics,* where he suggests shared interest in freedom from the gender binary is a ripe opportunity to deepen the dialogue between transhumanists and posthumanists. To make his case, Hughes posits that transgender people have been disproportionately attracted to transhumanism because of it's advocacy of the right to control and modify one's own body (a.k.a *morphological freedom*). At the same time however, transhumanists—reputedly dominated by 18-40 year old men with engineering and natural science backgrounds—are for the most part conspicuously silent on the effects of emerging technologies toward the future of gender and sexuality.

By contrast, Hughes recognises posthumanists have been actively engaged in the (de)construction of the sex/gender system. These efforts have typically attempted to break down such categorisations at the level of ideology, or considered how some uses of technology might blur gender identities, but have not yet advanced the kind of materialist postgender program put forward by those scant few commentators in the transhumanist community (namely Ray Kurzweil, Martine Rothblatt, and Natasha Vita-More among select others). For Hughes, starting cooperative dialogues centred around the prospective freedoms which could soon be afforded by emerging technologies seems like a viable means for the two outlooks to supplement one another.

Speaking on the politics of trans- and posthumanism more generally, Hughes, who himself espouses a left-leaning transhumanism, recognises how wealthy Californian libertarians currently hold an inordinate level of influence upon transhumanist discourse. This present situation is, he explains, an outgrowth of the movements inceptive associations with the extropian anarcho-capitalists. The extropians, a group of techno-futurist utopians arising in Southern California during the early 1990's, then consider democracy and the state to be inherently conservative towards the radical personal and social experimentation they wish to pursue.

Undoubtedly, the extropian wing of transhumanism has since built powerful allegiances in libertarian political circles, with several leading transhumanist-dominated groups — including the Singularity Institute for Artificial Intelligence and the anti-ageing Methusaleh Foundation—now coming to receive substantial financial backing from the decidedly pro-market millionaires and billionaires of Silicon Valley. Accordingly, it would appear the only way to *'break the hegemonic control of the bioutopian imagination by the privileged'* is for sympathetic *technoprogressives* (a stance combining

techno-optimism with radical egalitarianism) to form alliances with other progressive movements, such as struggles for health care access, internet freedom, drug decriminalisation, and reproductive, disability and great ape rights (143).

In short, Hughes wishes for democratic transhumanists to build solidarity with those also now fighting for various freedoms and social justice—a sentiment reiterated in November's Technoprogressive Declaration—with the view to ensure future use of emerging technology is appropriately regulated and made universally accessible, lest existing social inequalities be exasperated by an introduction of enhancement technologies into a market environment. While many will no doubt find the call for techno-centric unity among progressives presented here compelling, inevitably the specific value attributions at work give rise to their own principled exclusions and cultural 'otherings' (recently well captured by SERRC members Adam Riggio and Alexandra Argamakova respectively).

New Bodies, New Selves

Correspondingly, at this point it is fitting to direct attention toward Italian Philosopher Francesca Ferrando's more sobering contribution titled *The Body* appearing under the ontological section of the volume. Ferrando's sharp-edged essay, wholly sympathetic toward what she identifies as a posthumanist position, considers the shifting onto-epistemological perceptions of the human as an embodied being in the technological age. Ferrando's critically minded piece exposes how historically recognition and denial of human status has been formed through the construction of the non-human "Other", before acknowledging how within Western tradition the 'human' as well as 'the human body' has been unequivocally white and male. Crucially, according to Ferrando transhumanists lack a deep critical reflection on the various historical configurations of human embodiment, and instead consider the biological body as a mere "outfit" for transformation according to individual desire.

In Ferrando's judgement, posthumanism altogether supersedes transhumanism owing to its comparatively holistic approach that recognises the multiple specifities of the organic body, and with it remains open and permissive towards alterity and expressions of difference. Posthumanism therefore not only provides a radical deconstruction of the human, but when considering alternative forms of embodiment—including the possibility of technological extension—stays critically aware of the embodied nature of the (post)human as situated in the world and as a result of socio-political interactions. The most pressing question for Ferrando then becomes: '*how are the histories and herstories of the historical human body going to affect our posthuman future?*' (222). Denying the accounts made by subjects who have been historically located outside of hegemonic discourses will offer a very limited notion of the human, she warns. The humanist fallacy of the omniscient neutral subject is antithetical to the more recent (nay accurate) representation of humanity as an evolving life form rich in diversity.

Something of a recurring motif throughout this volume is transhumanism's relative programmatic clarity when positioned against posthumanisms apparently incoherent normative politics. At the same time however, while it may be true that transhumanists

have apparently achieved a greater consensus than the posthumanists, radical disagreements still exist between its various factions around issues of funding, regulation and access to enhancement technologies. As Hughes recognises, present day transhumanists have effectively come to inherit all the same arguments about the value and meaning of liberty, equality and solidarity that divided their Enlightenment forebears.

It is reasonable to expect, given the significant biotechnological and cybernetic developments happening in the interim—that is, advances in genomics, robotics and prosthetics intensifying over the last quarter-century—emerging technologies could soon enable a greater range of 'humanities' than formerly contained by 20th century notions of gender, class and race. Moreover, in light of an ever-growing body of self-reflexive commentary, there has—at least in principle—never been greater opportunity for our future techno-projections to be rooted in a comprehensive critical account of what it means to be human.

Conclusion

Finally then, we may finish where the lead-editors began, considering the commonality (if not potential for future collaboration) between transhumanism and posthumanism. To its credit, this collection draws up the conventional battle lines with resounding clarity, before giving centre stage to the more nebulous intersections that have been all too often neglected by previous works. The result is an energetic collection of essays that travel well together, if at times agonistically so.

All things taken into account, far from abandoning their key differences in some profound synthesis, it seems more realistic to expect the communities to continue formulating their own alternative visions of utopia, which might conceivably be compounded by fence-hopping biopolitical activists. If its nods toward the emancipatory potential of new technology can start bridging the imaginations of those progressives otherwise polarised by the trans/post divide, then Ranisch and Sorgner's text could help move these discussions in some interesting new directions. Equally however, if the clear dissent rumbling between its covers is a bellwether of things to come, we can safely say our notions of both diversity and tolerance will also be pushed to the limit.

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