

**THE ENHANCED HUMAN?**  
**Ethical Assessments and Implicit Images of Man**  
**from a Theological Perspective<sup>1</sup>**

*by*  
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**1. From the Homo Faber to the Homo Fabricatus**

“Homo faber” is the name of a novel by Max Frisch that was published in 1962. The hero of the book is a technical engineer whose rational worldview is thrown out of joint due to tragical entanglements. Other characters in novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were also engineers, for example, Ulrich, the “Man without Qualities”, in Robert Musil’s novel of the same name. Engineers are considered the epitome of Modernity. Apart from literature, philosophy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also dealt with the character of modern technology. Martin Heidegger’s critique of technology is particularly radical. Heidegger analysed the calculating character and the violence of modern technology concerning the handling of nature and its consequences for the self-conception of the human being.

Another developmental step is marked by genetic engineering. “Life sciences” is the name of the bioscientific-technical complex of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that reaches from agriculture to molecular medicine. Biotechnology leads to new, profound changes in our worldview and anthropology. The *homo faber* becomes a *homo fabricatus*. Freely adapted from Karl Marx, the philosophers and theologians have merely interpreted human beings differently in the past. The new biosciences, however, are all about changing them.

Earlier eras also assumed that humans are changeable and in need of change. On the one hand, humans were regarded as part of the microcosm that depicted the downright perfection of the macrocosm. On the other hand, earlier eras also knew about the misery of human beings, their physical vulnerability, and their moral imperfection. The great religions are convinced that a human being is not only in need of healing, but also of salvation. Next to the hope for salvation, the optimisation of the spirit and the body is one of the ancient dreams – and nightmares – of humankind. To accomplish this, past eras used to rely on upbringing and education, on religion and morals, or – after the Enlightenment – on politics and social tech-

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<sup>1</sup> Talk at the CEC Consultation “Human Enhancement: Moral, Religious and Ethical Aspects from a European Perspective”, held on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

niques. Before, the actual bio- or life sciences used to be ethics, understood as a theory of the human conduct of life. Modern “life sciences” include biology, biochemistry, and molecular medicine instead.

New human factors, technologies, rely on the technical manipulation of the human body and its biological consistency – up unto the smallest components, the cells, genes, and molecules. Body and the human spirit (*psyche*) become objects of biotechnological interventions. From a neurobiological point of view, the spirit is a system property of the brain. The connection of genetics, genomics respectively, neurobiology, information sciences, and nanotechnology inspires visions of new kinds of interventions in the human brain, be it in order to heal psychological or neurological illnesses, be it in order to optimize intelligence and cognitive performance.

Behind all these medical and bioethical questions that reach from stem cell research to converging technologies<sup>2</sup> – that is the combination of nano-, bio-, information-, and cognitive sciences –, the question of the image of man and its place in the cosmos, which can act as a guide, arises. There is no unanimous answer to the question what the human being is. The ethical conceptions are as different as the various anthropologies were and are in past and present.

Stereotypical talk of *the* image of man, for example, the Christian image of man, is of course an unhistorical construction. There is no such thing as *the* Christian, or *the* Humanist image of man, at least in this form, and above that, both are subject to historical transformation processes, which are, among others, the result of the involvement with Enlightenment, as well as with the results and advances of the modern sciences and the humanities, and with changes in society, such as the transition from an agricultural to an industrial society, and then further to a post-industrial service and information society.

Above that, the various Christian denominations vary in their approach towards dogmatic as well as anthropological questions concerning, for example, the concept of nature, the understanding of human freedom, and the concept of sin. This points towards the fact that, in ethical questions, answers of Churches and of individual Christians can vary. The Christian view on humanity thus features a certain plurality, which even, in part, exists across denomi-

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<sup>2</sup> On converging technologies and the ethical issues they raise cf. M.C. Roco/W. S. Bainbridge (eds.), *Converging Technologies for Improving Human Performance. Nanotechnology, Biotechnology, Information Technology and Cognitive Science*, Dordrecht et.al. 2003; W. Baumgartner/B. Jäckli/B. Schmithüsen/F. Weber, *Nanotechnologie in der Medizin*, Bern 2003; A. Grundwald, *Ethische Aspekte der Nanotechnologie. Eine Felderkundung*, in: *Technikfolgeabschätzung – Theorien und Praxis* 13, 2004, no. 2, p. 71–78.

nations. In this sense, it seems more appropriate to speak of Christian *images* of man, rather than of *the* Christian image of man.

Images of man are the result of complex processes of cultural and religious hermeneutics. Thus, the question is posed in a one-sided way, if it only asks how long technological progress will (still) be compatible with a certain kind of image of man. At the same time we must ask to what extent an ideological or religious tradition can manage to process historical changes in a productive way, and to reinterpret out-dated elements of tradition so that they allow present-day humans to interpret their own existence in a meaningful way. Without doubt, a specific anthropology always has a critical function regarding ethics. *Critique and hermeneutics are, however, dialectically interrelated.*<sup>3</sup> That does not mean that we should let technological progress go unchallenged. Instead, the focus should be on the ambivalences of this epochal process between the poles of hermeneutics and critique.

*Critique of technology* asks: Where are the boundaries of the ethically justifiable, outside of which the use of science and technology leads to inhumanity? The *hermeneutical* issue of technology is, however, what it means for a human being's self-conception if it has to understand itself as a technically generated product of fellow members of its species. How can the concept of human dignity be charged with meaning and sense under these circumstances? Or put differently: What is the concept of the image of God from the Jewish and Christian tradition even supposed to mean? In, with, and under the related technological aspects, will the human being still arrive at a personal faith that God ultimately created it "and all creatures" (Martin Luther)?

If we are able to make a claim of truth for biblical creation faith, it must still be valid under the circumstances of contemporary biomedicine. If the conviction that the human being is an image of God should be basically be finished dispatched by the use of certain reproductive technologies, then the story of the creation would be an obsolete myth.<sup>4</sup> But, if an understanding of existence which is accessible to faith speaks out from within the discourse of creatureliness and of the person as an image of God, then the contemporary human being still has

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<sup>3</sup> See in detail U. Körtner, *Unverfügbarkeit des Lebens? Grundfragen der Bioethik und der medizinischen Ethik*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2001; *id.*, "Lasset uns Menschen machen". *Christliche Anthropologie im biotechnologischen Zeitalter*, München 2005, part. p. 23ff (chapter I). The dialectical interrelation of hermeneutics of technology and the critique of technology are not taken into account enough by the heuristics of fear which Hans Jonas demanded. According to the heuristics of fear bad prognoses of the future must always be given priority over positive scenarios of the future, which is why one must do without technological advancement if in doubt. Cf. H. Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, Frankfurt a.M. (1979) 1984, p. 63ff; trans.: *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (trans. by H. Jonas and D. Herr), Chicago 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the famous "erledigt" – "finished" – in R. Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie. Das Problem der Entmythologisierung in der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung*, ed. by E. Jünger, München 1988, p. 16 pass.

the possibility to interpret itself according to this understanding. The distinction between instrumental knowledge and orientational knowledge may be helpful in this regard. Our conduct of life and our action do not find basic orientation in abstract principles, but in meaningful stories, in metaphors and symbols. Belief in creation and the certainty of one's own creatureliness are also located at this level.

## 2. Ethics as Applied Anthropology?

The protestant theologian Wolfgang Trillhaas had the opinion that all ethics is “applied anthropology in every sense”.<sup>5</sup> However, the concept of application is just as ambiguous as the conventional concept of applied ethics. It gives rise to the impression that it merely has to do with casuistically applying an established idea of the human to practical problems of conduct. Who or what is applied here by whom to what? Who is the subject of the application? To whom is it addressed? And, does “applied anthropology” mean that anthropological reflection goes before action, or does it mean retroactively giving an account of our morally based decisions?

The idea of an applied ethics is subject to similar difficulties. For example, it is unclear what precisely is applied in so called applied ethics: principles, criteria and norms or models, paradigms, examples and experiences, and thus, what is generally called “topic”, that is, the teaching from platitudes or typical situations. If applied ethics is understood in terms of topic, it nevertheless does not bespeak the application of an ethical theory. There is a discrepancy between theoretical ethics and applied ethics.<sup>6</sup>

The aims and objects of medical ethics, for example, are more felicitously characterized by the concept of area ethics, introduced by Julian Nida-Rümelin, than by applied ethics.<sup>7</sup> Area ethics presupposes that differing fields of practice “confront us with different kinds of problems, which require different kinds of ethical reflection”<sup>8</sup>. Economic ethics, legal ethics, political ethics, ethics of science, media ethics, bioethics and medical ethics are the most important examples for area ethics. The goal of ethical reflection, as little as it should have to do

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<sup>5</sup> W. Trillhaas, *Ethik*, Berlin <sup>3</sup>1970, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J. Nida-Rümelin, *Theoretische und angewandte Ethik: Paradigmen, Begründungen, Bereiche*, in: *id.* (ed.), *Angewandte Ethik. Die Bereichsethik und ihre theoretische Fundierung*, Stuttgart 1996, p. 2-85, here p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. Nida-Rümelin, *loc. cit.* (comm. 6), p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> J. Fischer, *Gegenseitigkeit – die Arzt-Patienten-Beziehung in ihrer Bedeutung für die medizinische Ethik*, in: *„Medizin- und bioethische Perspektiven. Beiträge zur Urteilsbildung im Bereich von Medizin und Biologie*, Zürich 2002, p. 15-34, here p. 34, *own translation*. See also K. Bayertz, *Praktische Philosophie als angewandte Ethik*, in: *id.* (ed.), *Praktische Philosophie. Grundorientierung angewandter Ethik*, Reinbek 1991, p. 7-74.

with assimilating morality or ethics to the presumed “practical constraints” of the varying areas of praxis, also cannot consist in “codifying and fixing the moral status quo. Rather, ethical reflection is compelled to critically examine the moral standards of the traditional ethos, and to investigate their effects on individual and societal praxis.”<sup>9</sup>

The same goes for anthropology. What the human being is, what it can, should, or wants to be, is not determined in advance. It must be spelled out anew, again and again, in all ethical conflicts over medical and technical innovation, as well as in political and societal developments and upheavals.

According to Immanuel Kant, there are three basic questions with which human persons are concerned: What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? Yet, according to Kant, all three questions lead to a fourth and final question: What is the human? Yet Kant’s basic questions – in view of rapid technological progress and the economic, political, and social revolutions which follow in its train – are in danger of disappearing from view. Confused, we latecomers of modernity (as philosopher Hans Blumenberg puts it) are asking: “But what was it we wanted to know?” We are just as perplexed when it comes to answering Kant’s question concerning right acts and omissions, as well as a reasonable hope and a humane future.

We find the question concerning the being-human of the human person even more difficult to answer. Today, it is not only controversial what the human being is, but also who is a human being. That is: the questions as to whether a distinction can, or even must be made between the human organism and the person, when the life of human individual begins and ends, how it may be medically and technically altered, and whether biological boundaries between living species or between animate and inanimate matter are merely technical, or whether they mark off moral and ethical boundaries as well.

In his novel, “Self-portrait with Turban”, the Dutch writer Harry Mulisch answered the question, of what the human is, in an unusual way: “The answer is: ‘What is the human?’” The question about what the human being is, is in reality the answer, “for the human being is not an answer, but a question.”

Anthropology inquires into the question which the human *is*. Indeed, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein pointed out that to an answer which one cannot utter, the question remains likewise unutterable. How, therefore, can we understand the human being as a question, if we do not know the answer to this question? Theology inquires into the answer, to

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<sup>9</sup> M. Honecker, *Von der Dreiständlehre zur Bereichsethik. Zu den Grundlagen der Sozialethik*, Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik 43, 1999, p. 262-276, here p. 272, *own translation*.

which the human being is the question. The religious symbol for this answer is the word “God”. Nevertheless, the answer to which the word “God” points, does not hush the question which the human being is, rather, constantly provokes it in new ways. How this occurs is one of the themes of theological anthropology.

As well as so called moral values, it is ultimately also basic religious convictions which are disputed in the confrontation concerning the introduction of new biotechnological and medical techniques, their regulation and political supervision. The open or latent religious hopes and claims to validity, which play a role in technological advancement, are in need of critical reworking. This is not the exclusive business of philosophy and of religious studies which understands itself as cultural studies. It continues to be the business of theology as well.

### 3. Image and Construction

One of the main difficulties concerning the discourse of bioethics and biopolitics in modern, pluralist society is that neither a generally binding religious, nor a universally valid metaphysical basic orientation can be presumed. Pannenberg already, and with great foresight, stated four decades ago: “When it comes to general awareness, the sciences concerning themselves with humans are well on their way to taking the place that metaphysics had in former centuries.”<sup>10</sup> As far as these sciences not only analyse and interpret the humanity of the human being, but also change it, the character of anthropology changes also. Anthropology is no longer merely *reconstruction*, but also *construction* of the human being. Statements on the alleged essence of the human or of nature in general, are replaced by projects and projections concerning the changeability of being.

Part of being human is not only to want to understand one’s own life, but also to draft, to design it. The philosopher Martin Heidegger declared the design to be an existential of the human being.<sup>11</sup> In the age of bio- and human engineering, the word “life design” has an entirely new ring to it. It now means the technical design, according to which life can be shaped, planned, and changed.

Every anthropology has the aim to design an image of man that is equal to us. From time immemorial, self-knowledge has counted as the highest kind of knowledge. According to a classical definition, truth is the *adequatio intellectus et rei*, i.e. the correspondence of state-

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<sup>10</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Was ist der Mensch? Die Anthropologie der Gegenwart im Lichte der Theologie*, Göttingen 1962 (1985), p. 5, *own translation*.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen <sup>15</sup>1979, p. 145ff.

ment and fact. Their consonance can be achieved in two ways: either by adapting a statement or theory to reality, or by changing reality with reference to an image of it.

Accordingly, the term “image of man” is ambiguous. Just like the images that humans draw of themselves, images of man that describe an anthropology based on science, philosophy, cultural science or theology are not mere copies of the human being, its nature and its essence. Every image of man has the character of a draft. Images are constructs which do not simply reflect reality, but actively influence and change this reality. It must be proven anew in each case how far the image that we or others have of us is an image that is true to reality, or one that corresponds to an ideal, a wish or a distorted perception. Furthermore, self-description and the description of others need not necessarily coincide.

Provided that the image of man correlates with new forms of human engineering and an advancing medicalisation of human life, the difference between self-description and the description by others is substantial. The debate on enhancement mostly concerns questions of personal identity, self esteem, and various forms of the self – the private, public, and collective self. This is why we can expect important contributions to the debate about enhancement from psychology.

However, the problem of the self and self esteem is also a decidedly theological topic which leads directly into the centre of Christian hamartiology. According to Søren Kierkegaard, sin is essentially despair.<sup>12</sup> The Danish philosopher distinguishes between three forms of despair, namely the wish to be oneself desperately, the wish not to be oneself desperately, and vapidty as an expression of deepest resignation and self-abandonment. The different kinds of medical enhancement largely concern these forms of despair. Think, for example, of the field of nutrition and all kinds of diets, of obesity and anorexia, of plastic surgery and mood elevating psychotropic drugs.

Now, the task of the human being is always to conduct its life between the poles of freedom and fate.<sup>13</sup> In more concrete terms, this means seeing one’s body as a gift and a task at the same time. Theologically speaking, the question is, in which cases enhancement complies with the polarity of freedom and fate which is in accordance to the Creation, and in which cases the enhancement is a form of sinful despair, of the desperate wish to stay the way one is – and thus to resist the polarity of form and dynamics<sup>14</sup>, or of the desperate wish to be somebody else. In these cases, enhancement does not offer a way out of from despair, but only leads further into it.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. *S. Kierkegaard, Die Krankheit zum Tode* (Gesammelte Werke, 24<sup>th</sup> dept.), Gütersloh <sup>2</sup>1982.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. for this purpose *P. Tillich, Systematische Theologie*, vol. I, Stuttgart <sup>5</sup>1977, p. 214ff.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *P. Tillich, ibid.* (comm. 13), p. 210ff.

Concerning society and politics we must also ask who the subjects or institutions are who design the new images of man and try to implement them. In the course of this, do humans want to have themselves at their disposal– or others, whom they would shape according to their own image and their own wishful thinking? And who gives human beings the right to have others, and the unborn at that, at their disposal in this way? Are all attempts or fantasies to optimize human nature covered by the principle of autonomy? Or does self-determination, as well as reproductive autonomy which is proclaimed nowadays, not change into a scarcely bearable heteronomy for those who are objects of such manipulations? Where are the lines that demarcate the ethically legitimate wish to be healed and the unethical wish to breed humans?

In general, the health system is developing into a multi-optional association. Where are the socially acceptable boundaries of patient autonomy? Next to the right to be cured, is there a right to optimize one's nature, for example, one's cognitive performance or visual function? Are the reversibility and irreversibility of medical interventions which are discussed under the term of "enhancement" ethically relevant criteria? Or the distinction between interventions that only affect the concerned individual, and those that – as is the case, for example, with germ line therapy – affect following generations, or could even effect a fundamental change of the human species?

The transition between therapy and non-therapeutic interventions in the field of so-called neurological enhancement, as well as in other areas of medicine, is a fluid one. Furthermore, who determines the boundaries in the individual cases is an open question. To decide and to negotiate which conditions and states of health fall into the category of diseases, and which do not, is becoming increasingly difficult. Problems of definition are caused not only by the concept of enhancement, but also by that of medical indication.<sup>15</sup>

#### **4. Ethics and Technology**

Any science ethics must gain an overview of the fundamental connection between technology and modern science.<sup>16</sup> The philosopher Helmut Plessner referred to the human form of existence, determined as it is by technology, as natural artificiality. The converging technologies, i.e. the combination of nano, bio, information, and cognition sciences lift natural artifici-

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<sup>15</sup> On the state of the debate cf. *B. Schöne-Seifert/D. Talbot* (eds.), *Enhancement. Die ethische Debatte*, Paderborn 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *U. Beck*, *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*, Frankfurt a.M. 1986.

ality to a new stage of development. Nature is invariably a conceptual and epistemological construct. The linguistic sign “nature” always wins its meaning in different scientific and cultural practices of interpretation. Also, in the course of the history of technology, nature has increasingly become a technical construction. The *telos* of nature has increasingly turned from a supposed self-will toward a sense of human action. Remembering elementary questions of the image of man and the image of the world or worldview – in German “Menschenbild” and “Weltbild” –, that is, the discussion of the essence of modern technology and the perspective on life that it determines, must therefore precede any individual question of material ethics.

The position of human beings in nature is characterised by their technical processes, which differ significantly from animal behaviour. Human technology is not confined to the use of certain tools which can also be observed amongst animals. Rather, human use of tools takes place because of aims and methods that implement the concept of causality in an organised way.<sup>17</sup> Even if the being human of the human person is not realised merely by having technology, “the human being is a human being in its exceptional position, *by* having technology. Therefore, technology is a constitutive, an essential or epistemological determination of the human being.”<sup>18</sup> Any ethics of science or bioethics has to keep this circumstance in mind.

According to Martin Heidegger, the essence of technology has determined modern science from the beginning.<sup>19</sup> Modern technology does not follow science as a mere application, but is already present in its roots. The scientific experiment uses technical devices with which nature is prepared in such a way that it can be measured with precision. Regarding the famous *dictum* of Galileo Galilei, modern science is comprised of measuring that which is measurable, and to make measurable that which is not measurable. The calculating eye on nature, which also means the mathematisation of the natural sciences (which Logical Positivism, for example, declares as the measure of all science, is only enabled by technology and technical progress).<sup>20</sup>

Because the character of modern technology defines modern science in all its disciplines, the debate on ethics in the sciences is to a great extent concentrated on questions of technol-

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. E. Cassirer, Form und Technik, in: P. Fischer (ed.), Technikphilosophie. Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart, Leipzig 1996, p. 157–213, here p. 185.

<sup>18</sup> P. Fischer, Philosophie der Technik, München 2004, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> M. Heidegger, Die Frage nach der Technik, in: *id.*, Die Technik und die Kehre, Pfullingen 1988, p. 5–36.

<sup>20</sup> For example, the invention of the telescope in order to explore macrocosm and the microscope to investigate microcosm led to the replacement of pre-modern, natural-philosophical speculation with a technical kind of speculation, in the literal sense of the word. Observing nature with the bare eye and natural-philosophical thoughts on the essence were replaced by the observation with the aid of technical instruments.

ogy ethics.<sup>21</sup> This term has two meanings. On the one hand, technology ethics signifies an ethics for technology that aims at assessing the consequences of technology. In this sense, technology ethics is a form of applied ethics or area ethics. On the other hand, on a more basic level, technology ethics can be perceived as an ethics that is rooted in the essence or nature of technology. Technology ethics in this sense is not concerned with external moral or ethical norms of technology, but discusses “the possibility of an internal rationale of morality from the essence or character of technology”<sup>22</sup>.

On closer inspection, one is confronted with a vexing dilemma. In the call for a renewal of ethics, or even a new ethics, the protest against technological rationality does register, a general malaise of civilisation and its discontents (Sigmund Freud). However, part and parcel of the “dialectics of Enlightenment”, is that it has made the ascendancy of technology complete, precisely that technology which first summoned the greater part of the ethical conflicts for which solutions are so urgently sought after today.<sup>23</sup> Amongst contemporary theologians, it was Michael Trowitzsch in particular who – in an intense and passionate conversation with Martin Heidegger on the one side, and Karl Barth on the other – pointed out the technocracy in the Era of Modernity, as well as the calculating intellect that shapes it.<sup>24</sup> Wittily, he worked out how the technocratic and, in its consequences, nihilistic will to power takes possession of the ethics which is deployed against it. To a great extent, the ethical search for pragmatic solutions of technocratic problems and conflicts bares the features technical rationality.

The question is, whether theology can perceive the conflict of interpretations, to which the phenomenon of the ethical is subject, only as a crisis, or also as an opportunity for reconsidering its position. Martin Honecker asks whether ethics is to be based on rationality alone, or whether it also needs “the enlightening power of love, which is not a product of rational calculation, and the encouraging power of hope and trust, of faith that transcends the available.”<sup>25</sup>. The *aporiae* of the ethical in the conflict of interpretations give occasion to think

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<sup>21</sup> As an introduction next to Peter Fischer’s work quoted in comm. 18 see *Chr. Walther*, Ethik und Technik. Grundfragen – Meinungen – Kontroversen, Berlin/New York 1992; *Chr. Hubig*, Technik- und Wissenschaftsethik. Ein Leitfaden, Berlin et al. 1993; *H. Lenk/G. Ropohl* (eds.), Technik und Ethik, Stuttgart <sup>2</sup>1993; *G. Ropohl*, Technikethik, in: *A. Pieper/U. Thurnherr* (ed.), Angewandte Ethik. Eine Einführung, München 1998, p. 264-287.

<sup>22</sup> P. Fischer, *ibid.* (comm. 18), p. 200.

<sup>23</sup> *W. Schulz*, Philosophie in der veränderten Welt, Pfullingen 1972, p. 631.

<sup>24</sup> See in particular *M. Trowitzsch*, Technokratie und Geist der Zeit. Beiträge zu einer theologischen Kritik, Tübingen 1988.

<sup>25</sup> *M. Honecker*, Ethik und Sozialethik, Theologische Rundschau 68, 2003, p. 151-199, here p. 199.

about dimensions of life “which the human being, of itself, is not able to actively produce, but which it can only grasp and understand in the form of promise and offer”<sup>26</sup>.

Religious as well as secular bioethics can be understood as an attempt to “moralise human nature”: To speak with Wolfgang van den Daele, “That which has become technically accessible because of science, should become normatively inaccessible again through moral control.”<sup>27</sup> At a closer look, the confusing ambiguity of the concepts of “nature” and “life” becomes visible. To make matters more complicated, the concept of life, similarly to that of nature, is often loaded with a religious meaning. Even Jürgen Habermas, who decidedly wants to keep his distance from a religious perspective, takes the view that “in order for a person to feel at one with his body, the person needs to experience it as naturally grown – as the extension of the organic, self-regenerative life out of which the person was born”<sup>28</sup>.

The religious idealisation of self-regenerative life is also a danger for Christian ethics. Insofar as it gets caught in the nonreflective use of the word “life”, it is in danger of being confused with a religious incubator for all kinds of conventional wisdom.

In fact, that all life as such is supposed to be holy, as is repeatedly claimed, only sounds like an extreme radicalisation of ethics at first, but in actual fact, it leads to its abolishment. “Where all is holy, nothing is holy anymore.”<sup>29</sup>

“Relying on ‘ethics’”, Michael Trowitzsch judges, “liberates from technology’s orbit of feasibility just as little as does wanting to retrieve ‘religion’.”<sup>30</sup> Rather than unreflectively religiously reinforcing Habermas’ proposal of the moralisation of human nature, the essential task of theology consists, conversely, in a confrontation and critique of ideology, aimed at the societal and ecclesiastical tendency toward resacralisation of human nature. That is, to put it more precisely, of the personal existence and life-(hi)story of initially abstracted forms of human life. This is exactly what applies, for example, to embryos that were fertilized *in vitro*.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> W. van den Daele, Die Natürlichkeit des Menschen als Kriterium und Schranke technischer Eingriffe, in: Wechsel/Wirkung, Juni/August 2000, p. 24-31.

<sup>28</sup> J. Habermas, Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur. Auf dem Weg zu einer liberalen Eugenik?, Frankfurt a.M. 2001, p. 101.

<sup>29</sup> Chr. Türcke, Kassensturz. Zur Lage der Theologie, Lüneburg <sup>2</sup>1997, p. 100.

<sup>30</sup> M. Trowitzsch, loc. cit. (comm. 25), p. 154. Regarding his critique of modernism see also M. Trowitzsch, Über die Moderne hinaus. Theologie im Übergang, Tübingen 1999.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. V. Gerhardt, Der Mensch wird geboren. Kleine Apologie der Humanität, München 2001, p. 12 ff.

## 5. The Controversy of God and the Controversy of the Human

According to the provocative thesis of philosopher Fanz Josef Wetz, “human dignity is violable”<sup>32</sup>. When one thinks about the raging controversies concerning the opportunities and limits of Biomedicine, he appears to be right.<sup>33</sup> Despite its recognized significance, being based on a human rights which is founded upon human dignity, the value and concept of human dignity (itself) is becoming increasingly less self-evident. Who qualifies as “human,” as defined by human rights, and when a human life begins and ceases to qualify as deserving protection, is a topic of debate. This is true even of a country such as Germany, in whose constitution the inviolability of human dignity is more sturdily anchored than in the constitution of Austria.

Granted that the idea of human dignity viewed historically and systematically, is not exclusively derived from the Christian perspective on humanity, the Christian perspective is, nevertheless, one of the important roots of the thought. This, precisely, is what makes the idea of human dignity suspicious in the eyes of certain philosophical orientations. The appeal to human dignity is occasionally dismissed as mere rhetoric, and its Christian rationale as religious particularism.

Some years ago, James D. Watson, who, together with Francis Crick, discovered the structure of the chromosome in 1953, and thus laid the foundations for genetic engineering, designated the Christian perspective on humanity as a disruptive for research. He declared that the appeal to a creator God and his commandments justifies unnecessary suffering, which could be avoided today through genetic engineering and eugenics.<sup>34</sup> The philosopher Ronald Dworkin considers anxiety, concerning the possible abuses of eugenic genetic engineering, to be understandable. Nevertheless, in his opinion, the only alternative is “unaccountable cowardice in the face of the unknown”<sup>35</sup>. In the sense of a balancing competing interests, the possible risk of abuse could be balanced out by the hope that the number of genetic defects and deformities could be decreased, and possibly that desirable characteristics, intelligence for example, could be increased.

It would be misguided to express moral indignation about the new super-humanism, without providing counter-arguments. Likewise, a hasty retreat to the uncontested territory of Christian faith would be theologically fatal. In the ethical discourse of a pluralistic society, it

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<sup>32</sup> *F.J. Wetz*, *Die Würde der Menschen ist antastbar. Eine Provokation*, Stuttgart 1998.

<sup>33</sup> On the following cf. also *U. Körtner*, *Freiheit und Verantwortung. Studien zur Grundlegung theologischer Ethik*, Freiburg im Üechtland/Freiburg im Breisgau 2001, p. 57-68.

<sup>34</sup> *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* from 26.9.2000.

<sup>35</sup> *R. Dworkin*, *Die falsche Angst, Gott zu spielen*, in: *Die Zeit* no. 38, 16.9.1999, p. 15.17, here p. 17.

is not enough to simply declaim religious certainties in the style of decisionist confessions. There is no rational, final justification for faith. Yet, there are good reasons whereby faith can provide information with reasonable arguments.

There is no need for theological justification in order to see through the groundless, reductionist view of humanity which, for example, is sometimes derived from the findings of molecular biology. The question as to what the human being is cannot be answered in a purely biological manner. The answer, namely, that what is at issue is the *animal rationale*, defines the human being as an animal, and reduces the essence of the human being to a *differentia specifica*, distinct from other animal genera. One thing, however, is clear: the contentions surrounding the human being are not solely interesting questions for a philosophical post-graduate seminar. Differing determinations of the human being decide, in the end, upon the human being's right to exist.

Thus, the question of the idea of the human does not only have to do with determining the essence of the human being. Ultimately, anthropology is always in search of grounds upon which it can justify the existence of humanity. When a human person is not able to justify herself, or her right to exist – because, for example, she is not yet born, because he is severely mentally disabled, because she is lying in a coma – who or what justifies her right to life?

The answer provided by the Christian reformed tradition is as follows: God justifies the life of each and every human being. The human being is the human being justified by God, and for this reason does not need to justify himself or his existence. This is the main point which protestant churches bring to the ecumenical conversation concerning the Christian perspective on humanity.

Yet, the protestant perspective on humanity in particular, is just as contentious as the Christian perspective is in general. The radicality with which the protestant tradition speaks of the justification of the sinner solely by grace through faith, corresponds to the radicality of its view of sin. “Radical evil,” (Immanuel Kant) is seen in such a radical way that it is maintained of the justified sinner that he is simultaneously righteous and a sinner – “simul iustus et peccator”. That, in any case, is Martin Luther's paradoxical and irksome formulation, which to this day has lost none of its offensiveness.

It is not only a post-enlightenment, modern sensibility which has difficulties with this anthropology. For, Luther's radical statements still cause significant difficulties for mutual understanding in the ecumenical conversation. Whether or not it is merely a difference of language, or indeed an insurmountable difference of theological groundworks which is at issue in the way the various confessions talk about sin and its continuing reality in the lives of the

faithful, still remains an open question. This was demonstrated in the discussions of the “simul iustus et peccator” in the context of the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>36</sup>

The contentions concerning the human being and the contentiousness of a theologically befitting anthropology ultimately point to the contentiousness of God. God’s existence, goodness, and righteousness are all contested. Herein consists the problem of theodicy. As a “science of conflict,”<sup>37</sup> theology considers the inner connection which exists between the contentiousness of God and the contentiousness of the human.<sup>38</sup> However, the interlace of the contentiousness of the human with the contentiousness of God comes most clearly into view in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ who, according to the biblical witness, is the incarnate Word of God. Owing to the way in which God and humans are reciprocally tied together – even in the contradiction of human sin – the protestant tradition emphasizes the connection between the doctrine of justification of sinners by faith alone, and the theodicy problem. Accordingly, the justification of sinners by faith alone is, at the same time, to be thought as the self-justification of God. For, it is not only the human person who accuses God, rather the existence of the sinful human, capable of malice, as such, which raises the question of the righteousness of God. What is meant here is not only other people, but rather myself! It is, concretely, *my* existence and *my* actions which can become an objection for others, and allow for doubts about the righteousness and the existence of God.

In Christendom, the saying above the entrance to the oracle of Delphi, “gnothi seauton – know yourself!” is modified to “know yourself – before God!” By this is meant, not an abstract, but rather a concrete and accordingly existential self-knowledge and knowledge of God. Thus, Luther writes in his exegesis of Psalm 51: “The proper object of theology is the man who is guilty of sin and is lost (*homo reus et perditus*), and the God who justifies and saves the sinner (*Deus iustificans vel salvator*).”<sup>39</sup> Thus, according to Luther, it is first at the event of justification that a person comes to full self-knowledge and knowledge of God. Only one who recognizes herself as a justified sinner – that is, as one in need of forgiveness and indeed as having received forgiveness – grasps the essence of God, which is gratuitous love.

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<sup>36</sup> For the current state of the ecumenical discussion see *Th. Schneider/G. Wenz* (eds.), *Gerecht und Sünder zugleich? Ökumenische Klärungen (Dialog der Kirchen 11)*, Freiburg im Breisgau/Göttingen 2001.

<sup>37</sup> *O. Bayer*, *Theologie*, Gütersloh 1994, p. 105.505 pass.

<sup>38</sup> Especially newer protestant theology, referencing the Reformation, proceeds not from the being of God, but from contentions concerning God. Cf. *G. Ebeling*, *Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens*, vol. 1, Tübingen<sup>2</sup> 1982, p. 169ff.

<sup>39</sup> *M. Luther*, WA 40/II,328. Cf. also *J. Calvin*, *Institutes* I,1,1.

From this vantage point, the world also is opened to the person as God's good creation, the knowledge of which is darkened by the power of sin, or distorted by unbelief.

In the first of the two Old Testament accounts of creation, it is God who says: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." It is the biblical God who forms humans after *his* image, and precisely therein consists the inviolable dignity of the human being. The creation-myth guides the reader to see the world and himself with God's eyes.

Then, the question as to what man is takes a surprising turn. In Psalm 8 the Old Testament prayer asks: "what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (Ps. 8:4 NRSV) In the form of prayer, the question about the essence of the human being is not addressed to the human being herself, rather it is addressed to God. The human being is ultimately determined, not only through the contrast between his greatness and his nothingness, but inasmuch as he is God's human being. His place in the cosmos is not based on the merit of his special attributes and abilities, but on Grace. And what comes to expression in the psalmist's question, how the human being has deserved the care and provision of God, is thankful and humble astonishment. Only where such amazement/astonishment finds resonance, for example in the observing scientist or the practicing doctor, is the theological conviction of the dignity of the human being grasped in its fullest depths.

To view the world with the eyes of God after the manner of the biblical creation-myth, certainly does not mean that the human being should make his own, God's self-prompted act of making human beings in his own image. Without a doubt, the multiple warnings concerning human Hybris, which is the driving force of bio-medical advancement, comes up short. For, along with along with natural-scientific, technological, and medical progress, a new responsibility accrues to the human being, from which he cannot back away by referring to the apparent elusiveness of life. It is precisely the constraint of conscious, accountable, access to one's own life as well as that of others which, not only according to general anthropological knowledge, but according to the biblical witness as well, distinguishes human beings as such.

All access to one's own life as well as that of others must ethically – and from the Christian perspective: be accounted for before God. Thus, the question is as follows, which forms of conduct, concerning the world and the self, accord with the confession of creatureliness in the image of God, and which forms of conduct contradict such a confession. To ethically accountable and religiously founded living, there always also belongs a conscientious treat-

ment of the human body. Interventions in the natural state of the human body can be in accordance with as well as contradict a confession of faith in God. Medical-technical manipulations are, however, not as such already assaults on the integrity of the creation. On the contrary, such can be the practical expression of a creational piety which attempts to do justice the biblical determination of human beings, under the conditions of our natural-scientific-technical age.

Natural science and technology rest upon *explanations* of that which we call nature or reality. However, one can only explain what one has *come to understand*, as I conversely must be able to explain what I have come to understand. There is, thus, an interplay between explaining and understanding. Of course there is a distinction to be made between explaining and understanding. However, neither one can be separated from the other. Hence, the distinction, which harkens back to Wilhelm Dilthey, between Natural science and the humanities, must not be stylized as the struggle between two unmediated, or even irreconcilable opposites.

The humanities and theology both have enough cause for self-critique. For, the much lamented ignorance of the humanities, when it comes to the natural sciences, is in part the invoice of the cultivated arrogance of the humanities, opposite the natural sciences, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the state of conversation between the two scientific cultures is not without a certain irony.

The rise of a new naturalistic monism is indeed problematic, and a corresponding utilitarianism. Naturalistic interpretations of the mind, of epistemology, of ethics, and even culture and religion - one must only call to mind the discussion of the problem of body and soul, or of free will, triggered by neurobiology<sup>40</sup> - lead to the dominance of the natural sciences, and to the increasing marginalization of the humanities. The prospect of societal and economical uses has not been without an impression on politics, leading thus to the taking up of corresponding political-scientific stances. As it concerns the sciences, Ethics must not be confined to treating questions of applied ethics in research. Rather, ethics has the means to develop the interdisciplinary discussion between the natural sciences and the humanities. If, however, the natural sciences and the humanities allow themselves to be played off against each other, it will not only be to their own detriment, but to the detriment of society as well.

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, *G. Roth*, Fühlen, Denken, Handeln. Wie das Gehirn unser Verhalten steuert. New completely revised edition, Frankfurt a.M. 2003.

## 6. Humanity after the Death of God

Bioethical discussions show how difficult it is for human beings to remain humane after the supposed demise of the Christian God. This is not to claim that the idea of human dignity is exclusive to Christianity. However, it should serve to indicate the Aporias into which the idea strays when the possibility of its religious justification is contested.

This has been demonstrated in the debate which philosopher Peter Sloterdijk unleashed with his essay *Rules for the Human Park*. In a contested and, it seems to me, wrong-headed interpretation of Martin Heidegger's *Brief über den Humanismus*, Sloterdijk not only asserts the antiquatedness of the human being as we know it up to now, but also the antiquatedness of western humanism.<sup>41</sup> Proceeding from Heidegger to Friedrich Nietzsche, but also wrestling with Plato's *Politeia*, Sloterdijk characterizes the word "humanism" as the futile attempt at self-domestication of the undetected "animal" human being. In consideration of the new biotechnology he raises the question, whether self-breeding should take the place of self-domestication, whether a new form of "anthropo-technology"<sup>42</sup> should take the place of traditional humanism and its view of humanity, whether a new *Übermensch*, an "über-humanist"<sup>43</sup>, should take the place of the old man.

And yet, perhaps the dismissal of the Christian tradition is overhasty. Certainly there is still the task of newly discovering its as of yet unreached potential and critical force. Accordingly, the new over-humanists err in assuming that the eugenic deployment of genetic engineering will lead to the final liberation of humans from their fate. In truth, the advances in the areas of medical genetics, predictive medicine, and reproductive medicine lead to new manifestations of fate. Christian belief in God, which sees the image of God in human beings, is in no way a version of belief in fate, as Dworkin insinuates. On the contrary, viewed historically, it led to the disempowerment of fate to which, according to ancient imagining, even the gods were subject. Hence, the modern denial of the Christian God, for which equivocal formulas of the death of God have been coined, has by no means paved the way to the final liberation of human beings from fate. Rather it has led, as Odo Marquard argues, to the return of fate, that is, to the emergence of new contingencies.<sup>44</sup>

This development is, for example, pressing in the area of predictive medicine where the gap is wide between already possible diagnostics and prognostics, and non-existent therapeu-

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<sup>41</sup> P. Sloterdijk, *Rules for the Human Park. A Response to the Letter on Humanism*, in: *Die Zeit* no. 38, 16.9.1999, p. 15,18-21.

<sup>42</sup> P. Sloterdijk, *ibid.* (comm. 42), p. 21.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> O. Marquard, *Abschied vom Prinzipiellen. Philosophische Studien*, Stuttgart 1980, p. 81.

tic approaches. For example, on the one hand the application of predictive methods of examination in prenatal medicine can serve for prevention, while on the other hand evoking ever new conflicts of decision.

Theologically spoken, it is the prevenient and free grace of God to which, independent of our biological condition, the human person owes his acceptance and justification. There is, in light of biomedical advancements, a new approach to the creaturliness and image-of-God in human beings. This new approach is opened up, not by a resacralization of nature, but by a justification-oriented theological reconstruction of the doctrine of creation.

The eschatological dimension of justification-faith is also relevant for bioethics, since a critical view of the latent or open danger of a soteriological elevation of modern medicine to a doctrine of salvation can be deduced from it. On one side, the command to love one's neighbor includes the duty to heal. The healing miracles of Jesus depicted in the New Testament, as well as the figure of thought of *Christus medicus* represent this.<sup>45</sup> On the other side, all human attempts to heal are placed under eschatological reservation. Eschatology is the Christian doctrine of the Kingdom of God and, accordingly, of the perfection of the world by God. According to this doctrine, healing and salvation are to be distinguished from one another. Otherwise, medical advancement is in danger of being seduced into barbarism by the spirit of Utopia. History, and especially the medical crimes of the 20. Century, teach us that the desire to heal can unleash a monstrous and destructive force. If the "therapeutic imperative" is misunderstood as a categorical imperative, medicine very quickly becomes inhumane – to the point of unethical experiments on human beings.<sup>46</sup>

It is especially those who are considered unhealable who very quickly fall victim to the dynamic of a utopian concept of health. It is not least the discussions about new forms of selection or human breeding which reinforces the necessity to defend the right to imperfection, and make clear its positive significance for the humanity of our society.

According to the view of the reformed tradition, human dignity is based on the prevenient grace of God, which comes to a head in the New Testament message of the unconditional justification of the sinner. Therefore, a human being's right to life is precisely not dependent on particular intellectual abilities or her physical constitution. This follows from the connection between the doctrine of justification and Christology. Christian anthropology does not

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. M. Honecker, *Christus medicus*, Kerygma und Dogma 31, 1985, p. 307-323; J. Hübner, *Christus medicus. Ein Symbol des Erlösungsgeschehens und ein Modell ärztlichen Handelns*, Kerygma und Dogma 31, 1985, p. 324-335.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. A. Kuhlmann, *Politik des Lebens – Politik des Sterbens. Biomedizin in der liberalen Demokratie*, Berlin 2001, p. 34f.

measure the person according to a generalized idea of the human and its ideal form. Rather it measures on the model of the suffering and crucified Christ, who “had no form,” “that we should desire him.” From here on out the the image of God in human beings, which is asserted within the framework of the Christian doctrine of creation, will be more closely defined.

Christian anthropology also knows the difference between the old and the new human being. Christian anthropology, too, speaks of the fact that it has not yet been revealed what we will be.<sup>47</sup> But what is at issue here is an eschatological difference. It is a reference to the final determination and perfection of the human being which he himself cannot achieve. However, it is the old human being in his finitude, in his imperfection and brokenness, in his failure and guilt, to whom the unconditional affection of God is granted, whom God’s human being should love as himself.

That the person who through faith is justified by God remains a sinner is a basic statement of reformed anthropology. The justified sinner is unable to improve himself or the world, whether on the path of morality, or through some kind of “anthropo-technology”. The old human being, in the biblical view, is not in need of improvement but of forgiveness. The creative word of forgiveness, however, does not make her better, rather it makes her new.

Thus, the contribution of Christendom to the anthropological and socio-political discussion of the present would consist in pointing toward a possibility for coping with contingency, which would free human beings from the compulsions of fate, whether self-produced or decreed by another. It is this Ethos of “letting-be” and pardoning, which rests on the premise that the human being does not owe his existence to himself, and that he did not bring himself into the world.

The development and nurture of an Ethos, even an Ethos of science, is not only a question of the concept of humanity, but also of education, namely the self-education and becoming-human of the human being. It includes the nurture of the religious dimension of our being human. Without a rudimentary consideration of our creaturliness, to which our birth as well as our death belongs, we will not arrive at an Ethos of respect for all the living. In a society which only thinks of itself as an information- or knowledge-society ethics has essentially abdicated, no matter how much it is continues to be talked about it. It should belong to the virtues of all researchers, to strive after education, not simply knowledge. If today the ethics of science and research are discussed, then it is not least because this virtue is apparently no longer self-evident.

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<sup>47</sup> I Jn. 3:2

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