

Human Nature as a Social Construction

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Abstract

We are usually inclined to consider well-functioning everyday-life concepts and interpretive patterns as timeless evidences, without questioning the origins of these concepts and patterns, or the particular historical and cultural conditions of their appearance and unproblematic functioning. Phenomenological sociology has taught us that the prescriptive forms of knowledge always become interesting and exciting when there is some kind of “disorder in the mechanism”, when the previously functioning reflexes seem to be questioned and become confused.

Accordingly, the first and also most important question is as follows: is there an eternally valid human nature, or do we only wish to believe in the existence of such a nature, prevailing over history? The answer is structured in the paper in two parts, discussing the postulates of post-human anthropology, and the ethical dilemmas raised in connection with the issues debated. Following the analysis, the paper concludes that as long as the discussions of moral philosophy fail to offer some generally acceptable solution, one must accept the regulating power of national and international law.

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I.

On Certain Postulates of Post-human Anthropology

We are usually inclined to consider well-functioning everyday-life concepts and interpretive or orientation patterns as timeless evidences, without questioning the origins of these concepts and patterns, or the particular historical and cultural conditions of their appearance and unproblematic functioning. Phenomenological sociology has taught us

that the prescriptive forms of knowledge always become interesting and exciting when there is some kind of “disorder in the mechanism”, when the previously functioning reflexes seem to be questioned and become confused.

If the past decades have witnessed any series of events which seemed to have questioned the very foundation of all our beliefs previously considered reliable, then this is most certainly connected to the ‘results’ of *genetics*, *bionics*, and *biotics*, that is, the radical transformability of ‘human nature’. We have already got accustomed to the fact that almost everything is prone to change in the world surrounding us: the landscape, the constructed environment, social structures, and the political, religious, ethical and aesthetic values related to them, etc. Nevertheless, one’s being born a man or a woman seemed like unchangeably evident – up to now, at least. But today this is no longer the case! It may happen that someone, whom we knew in high school as Adam, introduces him/herself as Eve on the 10-year graduation anniversary. Another example: it has been more than two decades since I read in one of Péter Esterházy’s short stories that he saw no human being who “had not had a mother and a father”. Our famous writer’s experience may soon be reconsidered: human cloning, apparently unavoidable, makes this evident statement historically anachronistic. According to many, these developments shatter the very foundation of the faith in the stability of our world, driving the Western man, frustrated as he is, to ultimate insecurity. As far as I am concerned, I am not at all this pessimistic. And how I wish to ground my standpoint termed as – in lack of any better – ‘limited optimism’, I will present within the framework of a microscopic historical-anthropological outline.

The first and also most important question is as follows: is there an eternally valid human nature, or do we only wish to believe in the existence of such a nature, prevailing over history?

The great world religions, among which Christianity is best known to us, usually start from the double nature of man. The man is at the same time a *created* and *creating* nature. The emphasis is naturally on the latter, because the source of the real dilemma is always whether the man is being or not being allowed to do those things that he is technically capable of doing under the given circumstances. Technology is of outstanding importance here. What I have in mind first of all is the fact that human life has no segment which would not be somehow connected to technique. The Asian yogi practice or its European counterpart, autogenic training is also a kind of artificial (artifactual)

exhibition which tries to draw the practicing person to a state ‘close to nature’ by various techniques (e.g. breathing techniques). Obviously, anyone from yogis to deep ecologists can only reach to “nature” in oblique ways, and by tools which are far from being natural. Ultimately, a person has to construct even his/her own nature artificially, whether it is the medieval *Imago Dei*-version, or the world of modern fitness studios. Naturally, this argument can also be disputed by saying that the Bible mediates a normative human image, according to which the fallen mankind had been presented with a normative/transcendent ideal as to how to reach back to the complexity of its original nature, confiding in God’s help, but essentially relying on its own strength; but the modern techniques of body/soul only involve a part of a human person at most. Actually, this argument is only convincing for our religious fellow-beings, but not even they can live their every days in the spirit of the *imitatio Christi*, because in a society working in functional subsystems even a simple bank operation is conditioned by the knowledge and acceptance of technical rules, and not by the “practice of a Christ-like life conduct”.

Then again, one must also face the constructedness of human nature when looking at the various kinds of gnostic and mystical trends which, partly symbiotically with official Christianity and partly suppressed to the status of heresy, had taken a standpoint in the matter of human nature more daring than that of official theology. The roots of late medieval and early modern mystical philosophy can be traced back to Antiquity, and are primarily built upon platonic cosmology. According to Plato, the cosmos is an enormous animated being ruled by a harmonic order repeated in eternity. The man as a microcosm – as opposed to macrocosm – has a mortal soul, and although this mortal soul is also capable of the ‘self-movement’ of the body, this movement is only transitory and by far not as harmonically organized than in the case of the macrocosm. In addition to the mortal soul, Plato also speaks about some kind of immortal soul, which he calls Logos, and the task of which is to harmonize the movement forms within the human being with the entirety of the cosmos. As according to Plato there is no direct correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm, this harmony can only be artificially attained. This maturity process appears in the human being as part of an educational-ethical programme.

Paracelsus’ microcosm-macrocosm theory radically transforms the platonic tradition. The cosmos appears for Paracelsus also as an enormous being, or rather as a *macro-organism*. But according to its

Christian starting point, Paracelsus' cosmos is no longer an immortal being, but as a created being, it is part of the fallen world, and it is burdened by numerous defects and diseases. The various "disorders" of the sky, for instance the ravaging storms or unusual climatic phenomena, can just as well be ranked as diseases as all other human illnesses. At the same time, man still emerges from among the created beings of the fallen world, because his being also contains, beside the four known elements (water, fire, earth, and air), the fifth element, the *quinta essentia*, which confers him a special place in the cosmos. Although the cosmos no longer means a normative ideal (as the fallen material world can no longer yield any such thing), the man as the doctor of heavenly anatomy can find several such opportunities by which, if using them smartly, can participate in healing the ailing nature. This idea, that healing the 'ailing nature' is a pre-eminent task of the man, appears even more emphatically in Jakob Böhme's mystical natural philosophy. According to Böhme the man is not so much a created being, but a fellow-creator of God, a *Mitschöpfer*. Böhme and other romanticist/mystical thinkers (such as Novalis or Franz von Baader) largely following his ideas stated that the art of the creation was not completed, as the *eighth day of the creation* is yet to come. Novalis attempted to find analogies for the man in the diverse existential spheres of nature, unlimitedly extending his power to nature as well in order for him to be able to change even natural laws. Influenced by the thinking of the Dutch Enlightened philosopher Franz Hemsterhuis, Novalis promoted the idea of the practically unlimited improvement of human abilities. In his view, in the future one should reckon even with the possibility of the man's developing *new senses and organs*.

Some decades later the French Condorcet follows the same path. In his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (A historical survey of the progress of the human spirit), he does not think it impossible to reach, even if not complete immortality, but a kind of quasi-immortality in the next stage of technical progress. "Would it be now absurd to suppose (...) that a time must come when death will only be the result of extraordinary accidents or the ever slowing destruction of vital forces, and in the end the duration of the interval between birth and death will have no limit whatsoever?"¹

¹ "Serait-il absurde maintenant de supposer (...) qu'il doit ariver un temps où la mort ne sera plus que l'effet d'accidents extraordinaires, ou de la destruction de plus en plus lente des forces vitales, et enfin la durée de l'intervalle moyen entre la naissance et cette destruction n'a aucun assignable?" Marie-Jean Antoine

In the nineteenth century the man/nature relationship was basically determined by the need to complete the Cartesian and Baconian programmes. This is the kind of approach which Husserl termed as the programme of the extended rule over the natural world (*Herrschaft über die Umwelt*), a basically rational and technical programme, referring primarily to external nature. From Fourier to Marx, the question of human nature appeared rather as the object of social or political utopias; transformability referred almost exclusively to external nature. As formulated by Gernot Böhme: “The programmes of self-construction were not related to the transformation of human nature, but much rather they were moral, educational, or political programmes. Even for Marx, the *humanisation of nature*, as far as it referred to human nature, was directed to cultural change and not its transformation.”¹

Gernot Böhme’s statement however needs some correction. Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, although interpreted in several scarcely reconcilable ways in the past 150 years, can hardly be regarded as anything else than an attempt to radically transform the *homo sapiens*, naturally accepting that Nietzsche’s endeavour is a metaphysical, or even post-metaphysical, rather than a ‘bio-technical’ one. The need to transform human nature appears even more obviously in the fantastic visions of Nikolai Fyodorov (founder of Russian cosmism). Fyodorov, probably independently from Condorcet, elaborated a technicist utopia on religious foundations in his *The Philosophy of the Common Cause*, in which he connected the ideas of the conquest of cosmos to the task of the universal spreading of Christian faith. To his mind, the correct understanding of the Bible asks for the cosmic extension of the scope of Christ’s salvation. If there are rational beings in the universe, then it is the man’s duty to present to them the ideas of Christianity. Ciolkovski, the ‘father of Russian space research’, who was well acquainted with Fyodorov, was also interested in the problems of rocket technology out of his mystical-religious beliefs. Another of Fyodorov’s ideas was

Nicolas de Condorcet, *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain*, quoted by Morin, Edgar: *La méthode. 5. L’humanité de L’humanité. L’identité humaine*. Paris: Seuil, 2001, pp. 236-237.

¹ „Die Programme der Selbstgestaltung bezogen sich nicht auf eine Veränderung der menschlichen Natur, sie waren vielmehr moralische, pädagogische, politische Programme. Auch die *Humanisierung der Natur* bei Marx war, soweit sie sich auf die menschliche Natur bezog, deren kulturelle Überformung, nicht ihre Veränderung.“ Gernot Böhme, *Die Natur vor uns. Naturphilosophie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*. Baden-Baden: Die Graue Edition, 2002, p. 94.

connected to the resurrection of the dead. Mankind cannot reach its happiness, he claimed, until it defeats the iniquities of nature, diseases and earthquakes and other natural disasters, but first and foremost the vilest terror of nature: individual death. One of the reasons of Lenin's embalming was to be able to revive him once the Soviet science reaches its "highest degree of development". (Several years ago I read in a newspaper that Russian scientists had announced that they are able at any time to extract cells for cloning from the world's most famous mummy).

It is obvious thus: whether we are speaking about Western rationality ruling over the rigid, "disenchanted" nature, or about the mystical and occult endeavours to re-enchant the world, the essence is not much different: the man appears in both cases as a quasi-god, radically interfering with natural processes. The human being is a disharmonic and eccentric being, unsatisfied with both his outer and inner nature. This of course is a basic truth well known to everyone. But the reason why these questions have become so important during the last decades is the man's interference with natural processes to a degree previously conceived only by the greatest visionaries of all times. The recent results of bionics (the connection of human flesh and technical instruments, e.g. the pacemaker), biotics (the connection of biology and computer technology, for instance research regarding computer-controlled human organs), and especially genetics utterly confuse us in our undisturbed application of natural/unnatural codes.¹ A couple of years ago I saw a short interview on television with the first man with an artificial heart. The middle-aged coloured gentleman, well surviving the risky operation, talked about the strangest thing for him during his convalescence, namely that he had no heartbeat. Bzzzzz, bzzzz.... Well, yes, this is not the same world any more. The beating heart, as we well know, is not merely a biological function, but also metaphor and poetry. Will anyone write poetry about buzzing? What is more, the mechanization of man is not a recent development. It is widely known that it was during the Renaissance when every being was first understood in the light of technical inventions. Leonardo considered the water of seas and rivers as the life-fluid of the mechanism of the earth. Slowly technology and machine became more than a simple metaphor. According to Galilei and Descartes all beings should also be regarded as machine-like mechanisms. The bird, writes Galilei, is an instrument

¹ Cf. Joël De Rosnay, *L'Homme symbiotique – Regards sur le troisième millénaire*. Paris: Seuil, 2000.

functioning according to mathematical laws, which can be almost perfectly reproduced by human technology in the near future. Descartes had a similar way of thinking, as clearly shown by his letter written to the Prince of Newcastle: "And no doubt that when the swallows arrive in the spring, they do it following the clocks".¹

By the dawn of modernity the machine had completely charmed the man. In La Mettrie's perception not only animals, but people also have no soul; those who still suppose its opposite, should rather turn to a doctor.² The mechanization of the life-world became almost complete by the 20th century. This time period also marked the beginning of the process in which the mechanical construction and the energy-metaphysics of Western society have placed their association on new grounds. From this point on, claims Peter Sloterdijk, one of the most original thinkers of our age, everything was built upon the logic of the operation of internal combustion engines. But what exactly is the danger of this bizarre coalition? According to Sloterdijk, nature's "normal energy management" favours implosion or slow energy degradation. (The almost unnoticed death of the machines rusting in the scrap yards, the strangely slow and "rotting" extinction of the artifactual world seems to justify the incomparable operational logic of natural energy).

At any rate, there is hardly any example of an explosion-like discharge of energy in nature. Lightning and the volcanoes are but some of the puzzling exceptions. At the same time, recent energy culture aims at a best possible compression of natural energy slowly and hardly collected, and its fastest possible combustion. "The logic of explosion is the microscopic catastrophe of cultural calling" – Sloterdijk says. Even nutrition culture simulates the working principle of the internal

¹ "Et sans doute que lorsque les hirondelles viennent au printemps, elles agissent en cela comme des horloges." René Descartes, *Œuvre-Lettres*. Paris: Gallimard, (*Bibliothèque de la Pléiade*), 1953, p. 1256.

² La Mettrie himself considered that the creation of talking robots similar to the man is at hand. In his work entitled *The man-machine*, he wrote: „S'il a fallu plus d'instruments, plus de rouages, plus ressorts pour marquer les mouvements des planètes que pour marquer les heures ou les répéter; s'il a fallu plus d'art à Vaucanson pour faire son flûteur que pour son canard, il eût dû en employer encore davantage pour faire un parleur: machine qui peut plus être regardée comme impossible, surtout entre les mains d'un nouveau Prométhée (...) Je ne me trompe point, le corps humain est une horloge, mais immense, et construite avec tant d'artifice et d'habileté que si la roue qui sert à marquer les secondes vient à s'arrêter, celle des minutes tourne et va toujours son train." Quoted by: Christine Detrez, *La construction sociale du corps*. Paris: Seuil, 2002, p. 35.

combustion engine. The calories of the foods, the vitamins and other dietary supplements follow the logic of a well calculated use of energy. One of the most entertaining pastimes for a well-to-do Western person is to run around freely in various malls or shopping centres, among hundreds of known and unknown merchandise, and – after a mechanical and tiresome job, and without any external constraint – to lose him/herself into a thorough analysis of the energy-values of all kinds of foods. Even alternative ideas appear as sources of energy. Eastern martial arts built upon a qualitative energy management can only hope for a Pyrrhic victory in the Western world; they cannot face the logic of quantitative energy for long.

“The victory of the machine world lies in the fact that technology rendered invalid the difference between social formations, and unimportant the differentiation of the two.” – Günther Anders says. This differentiation is well expressed in the use of language as well, as the machine and the fuel which operates the machine have been raised to the rank of metaphysical essentialities. (The French language exemplifies well this transposition of meanings by the use of the word *essence*, meaning essence and gasoline at the same time). It is clear thus, that machines as number one prosthesis techniques keep on confusing us by forcing us over and again to define our place in the world. Sloterdijk points out an important issue when characterizing the latest centuries as the always renewing subversion-campaigns of machines and technology. At the dawn of modernity the first wave of this subversion-campaign is formed by the so-called “hard technology”, that is, tools, machines and other known armatures. This also marked the beginning of that peculiar psychological process which Günther Anders termed in the 20th century as the “Promethean shame”. He uses this term to express that discrepancy which in his view, with the increasing technical progress, is continuously growing between the human being’s so-called natural “imperfection” and the “perfection” of the set of technical instruments created by him. The creator feels inferior to the object of his own creation, and his emotions usually react to the situation by an inferiority complex. By the middle of the 20th century the strategies which wished to compensate the superiority of object-like functionality and predictability by the purely human qualities of imagination, fantasy, emotion and responsibility were clearly defeated. For the man of recent times the

successful solution seems to be the “transhuman” solution, the assimilation to machines.¹

All this is completed by a tendency in modern art, gradually increasing from Baudelaire to our time, that art should not imitate nature, but should assert itself as a creator of alternative worlds. From the 1980s onwards, the intrusion of biotechnology and nanotechnology into art is more and more perceivable. The three famous representatives of *body-art*, Matthew Barney, Stelarc, and the French Orlan (who is originally a woman!) claim that the natural human body is not at all natural in our age, therefore in the age of technology the body must be adjusted to the technological, political, and social milieu wherein we live. The solitary creation of the solitary artist has come to an end; the artists must cooperate with physicists, technicians, engineers, computer technology professionals, plastic surgeons, etc. There is a need of new body techniques, the successful (!?) application of which may even cause us to face the complete transformation of the *Homo sapiens*. Besides being a well-known body-artist in France, Orlan also attempts a theoretical explanation of her unusual activity, interpreting her work as a peculiar kind of existential criticism. For Orlan the primary boundaries are not the

¹ Perhaps it is necessary to note that certain European thinkers tend to discover a sort of positive, stimulating force in the subversion-waves of modernity. One of them is the undeservingly forgotten Eastern German philosopher, Georg Klaus. Klaus, this strange Central European monster of philosophy belongs to those philosophers for whom the ideological bias and their evident inventiveness are inextricably linked. Georg Klaus predicted already in the 1950s the future subversive role of cybernetics, bionics and biotics, and in his original conclusions he anticipated on several occasions Western thinkers as well. In his lecture entitled *Elektrogehirn contra Menschengehirn*, held in 1957, he made interesting remarks about the expected future of the symbiosis between man and machine. Following Freud's ideas, he considered cybernetics as the fourth wave of subversion of modernity, which in many respects overwrites our traditional views on the relationship of man and machine. „Die Kybernetik wäre hier als vierter Schlag zu betrachten zwar insofern, als sie eine Reihe von Tätigkeiten, die wir ausschließlich dem Wirken des menschlichen Gehirn zugeschrieben haben, ihrer Sonderstellung entkleidet.“ Quoted by Frank Dittmann: *Menschengehirn und Elektrogehirn*. In: Klaus Fuchs-Kittowsky and Siegfried Piotrowski, *Kybernetik und Interdisziplinarität in den Wissenschaften. Georg Klaus zum 90. Geburtstag*. Berlin: trafo Verlag, 2004, p. 199. Klaus's article can be found in his volume: *Mensch-Maschine-Symbiose*. (Ed. Michael Eckhart), Weimar: Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 2002. I will dedicate an independent study for Georg Klaus' works, entitled *Georg Klaus and the debates on cybernetics in East Germany*.

social determinations; what she is not satisfied with is the human body's nature of 'being given' once and for all. Carnality is exactly the place from where the world can be rendered questionable. In the eyes of Orlan and other body-artists like her, the body is not something given, but something 'proposed', a possibility which can be practically limitlessly shaped. Orlan has re-operated her body continuously from the beginning of the 1990s. In composing her chosen new image, she makes use of computers as well. She constructs her continuously changing bodily identity from the representations of humans and chimaeras of Greek and Oriental mythologies, her own imagination, and all kinds of computer programs. She considers it most important not to resemble any of the female ideals created by European Renaissance culture and –according to her at least – remaining largely unchanged ever since. In this respect she follows the views of the radical feminist Judith Butler, who claims that female sexual identity is only a product of masculine cultural colonization. Orlan's new plan is to largely increase the size of her nose by plastic surgery. She has already had a pair of small horns operated on her forehead. Orlan, who thinks of herself as 'her own' Pygmalion, wishes to continue the radical transformation of her body even 'after her death'. More precisely, she is interested in the possibility of attaining immortality or at least quasi-immortality (just like Fyodorov was once, as we have seen). "Death never comes for Orlan, because one day we'll see her mummified body in a museum as a kind of interactive video installation."¹ Similarly to the representatives of Russian cosmism and the Bolsheviks, also reclining on the work of Russian cosmism (yet discretely concealing their names), who wanted to make natural laws a submissive instrument of their will, Orlan also claims to fight any kind of external determination. In one place she says: "My work is a fight against in-born dispositions, inflexibility, nature, DNA (which is in fact the direct rival of performance artists like us) and God."² Naturally, we tend to say about Orlan that we are only dealing with the imagination of an eccentric and lonely artist. Nevertheless, this is not quite the case. As one of her French critics writes: the identity which Orlan creates by her body

¹ "La mort n'narrêtera pas Orlan, car son cadavre momifié doit se trouver un jour dans un musée, insérée dans une installation avec vidéo interactive." In David Le Breton, *L'Adieu au corps*. Paris: Métailié, 1999, p. 44. See for more Pearl, Lydie; Bandy, Patrick and Lachaud, Jean-Marc (ed.): *Corps, Art et Société – Chimères et utopies*. Paris : L'Harmattan, 1998; Kisseleva, Olga: *Cyberart, un essai sur l'art du dialogue*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998.

² Le Breton, *L'Adieu au corps*, p. 44.

from time to time is also subject to the collective phantasms produced by a mediatized society. Plastic surgery endows us with the face we would then like to see in the mirror. But it needs more than that for this sight to be elevated to an aesthetic rank. Primarily it is the mediatized image world of the television which offers the ammunition even for an individual revolt. It is questionable of course, whether there is any kind of constant 'natural' basis behind a socially constructed body which resists the limitless transformability. These questions – which always emerge as ethical problems, whether we want them or not – are raised not so much in connection to bionics and biotics (as these techniques are clearly not influential for future generations), but in connection to the overwhelming possibilities of human genetics. These are the questions I will discuss in the second part of my paper.

II.

Ethical dilemmas

It was not accidental that in the first part of my paper I discussed in details the endeavours of modern body-art based on radical anthropological presuppositions. The relationship between the modern man's self-understanding and the aims and aesthetic manifestations of avant-garde art in general is much tighter than many might think. Several outstanding thinkers of the second half of the twentieth century from Habermas to Luhmann and from Bourdieu to Barthes have drawn attention to this relationship. I read at Sloterdijk that a sociological survey was conducted among students in Germany at the beginning of the 1990s, primarily about the life-form they would prefer first of all. Every fifth subject considered the artist's life-form as most attractive. Obviously, it is not the artist as the creator of a work of art who is inspiring for these young people, but rather the assumption that the artist represents the possibility of a "self-constructed" life. The artist is the symbol of a man possessing absolute freedom. The main ambition of modern education, "training for creativity" is nothing else – Luhmann comments on it with some irony – than the popularized version of the Romantic theory of the genius. "You can also be an artist if you want to", at least within the circle of those who think like you. These often perplexing extreme ambitions of self-realization prove that basic value of the Western democratic world that in this context everybody forms his/her own lifestyle (including his/her physical/psychological/intellectual constitution as well) – naturally, with

the observance of the legal framework of democratic constitutionality. By now the final and at the same time last normative conviction of practical philosophy (ethics and political philosophy) has only remained restricted to supporting the validity of the truth.

Jürgen Habermas, probably the best known German philosopher of our time, considers this simple approach problematic still, and argues as follows: if everybody “lives as he/she pleases”, then the individual moral insights are not embedded within an ethical self-understanding which could tell us why “we should be moral beings at all”. In fact, while not denying the need to autonomously create one’s individual life conduct, the society also contains pursuits which show the necessity for a generally valid ethics and this necessity – as we shall see – appears most emphatically with the most recent developments in genetics.

Habermas’ starting point is connected to a very simple observation. Namely, he says that the reference to a ‘normal life conduct’ is accepted even by those who otherwise claim the plurality of life-forms. The continuing success of psychoanalysis in Western culture is a good example for this, inasmuch as the popularity of psychoanalysis indirectly proves that the authentic and happy, or unsuccessful and unhappy life-conduct by turn has its specific criteria. Just as in the case of somatic diseases the disease can be determined in relation to the ‘normative ideal’ of the healthy body, the psychoanalyst as well wants to eliminate the psychic deviances by leading back the patient to a ‘normal life’. Naturally, philosophical ethics must follow a different path than psychoanalysis which deals with the codes of health/illness, but it is Habermas’ firm conviction that any kind of serious ethics must be able to differentiate between a good and a bad life.

According to Habermas, the truly important ethical dilemmas lead us to a general anthropological question, namely: “How can we truly be ourselves?” He thinks that the question of “being able to be ourselves” can only be answered in a trans-subjective way, an ethical self-understanding which is indeed ‘correct’ can only be formed in a community communication process.¹ Modern genetic technology endangers exactly these preconditions – continues Habermas. Genetic technology in its practically unforeseeable perspectives threatens the

¹ Jürgen Habermas, *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur. Auf dem Weg zu einer liberalen Eugenik?* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002, pp. 25-33. (English translation [ET] see Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*. Cambridge: Polity, 2003) and Thomas Runkel, “Habermas, Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur“, *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 1 (2003): 94.

symmetry regarded (at least until now) to be naturally present between humans, based on the random meeting and unpredictable combinations of human chromosomes. In addition, it also threatens the ‘ability to be themselves’ of potential persons as well, because outsiders (usually the parents) can strongly restrict or impede, by enforcing their own preferences, the genetically modified person to be able to differentiate between his/her own actions based on his/her freedom and the dispositions which others have ‘placed within’ him/her.

I think that Habermas’ point of view is an answer for those extremist liberal and – at a first sight surprisingly – Nietzschean, neo-pagan Gnostic conceptions according to which “first and foremost the liberals who consider themselves the advocates of human freedom” should be happy for the possibilities offered by genetic technology, because from now on everybody will really “do with themselves what they please”.¹

A solid liberal point of view is not identical in fact with this trivial understanding of freedom, Habermas says. The German philosopher starts from the fact that technical practicability does not necessarily mean an ethical legitimacy as well. No matter how prestigious science and the freedom of scientific research are in modern democracies, it is not impossible to set barriers for these fields also. However, in setting these barriers – which are usually embodied as laws – it is recommendable to proceed with caution. Modern medicine for instance is associated with extremely positive ideas (and perhaps often exaggerated hopes). A successful life conduct is naturally associated with the collective goals of a healthy life enjoyed for a long time. On account of all this, the philosopher finds himself in a difficult situation when drawing attention on the dangers of the practical application of genetic technology. There are thinkers who choose the – long familiar – path of the moralization of human nature, and urge the “re-enchantment” of the modern world’s de-mythologized concept of man and nature. That is, they say: let us place the human being’s psycho-physical constitution into some kind of “sacred space” and regard ‘that what is given’ as untouchable. Beside this, let us create artificial taboos, and let us mobilize our archaic emotional reserves which are embodied in our ancient abomination (?) against artificially created cloned chimaeras. Habermas chooses a different path. In his view the first thesis of the moralization of human nature states that we humans as moral beings can

¹ The note comes from Peter Sloterdijk.

only preserve our identity while our existence is *embedded in a self-understanding based on an ethics of species [Gattung]*. In a detailed exposition this means that we can regard ourselves as autonomous actors, we can be the rightful authors of our own life history as long as we regard our pertinence to the human species [Gattung] as something *of which we cannot dispose*. The primary danger of genetic manipulation lies in the fact of “[s]hifting the »line between chance and choice«”.¹ In order to clarify his statement, Habermas introduces certain category-like concepts. The most important of these terms are: *Gewachsene* (grown); its opposition: *Gemachte* (made), and *retro-active correction*. Naturally, Habermas accepts the claim that the man living in a society must admit to a certain degree that his life is largely instrumentalized. We can only achieve Kant’s imperative that we should never use our fellow humans as instruments with strong restrictions. Parental power, educational power, magisterial power, that is, the many forms of bio-power described by Foucault prove that in the case of the human being the spheres of *natural* and *artificial*, of *inner freedom* and *external constraint* are very difficult to be clearly distinguished. However, setting the boundary is still not impossible in Habermas’ view. In order to understand this, let us perform a thought-experiment. Let us assume that a person was brought up by his/her parents in a strong leftist spirit. Although the authority of the parents may last for a long time, eventually it does not define the political identity of the person once and for all. As he/she grows up, influenced by friends of a different political standpoint, or consciously choosing other political philosophies, the person may be able to retrospectively criticise parental determination and create an independent (free) political identity for him/herself. But the so-called positive eugenic intervention cannot be ‘undone’ any more. If the world arrives to a point when the parents can choose not only the sex of their child, but also the colour of their eyes or even their intelligence (!?), or may also have the embryo ‘endowed’ with some kind of talent-disposition (e.g. an outstanding voice), and the preferences of the parents by a fortunate coincidence would meet the preferences of the grown-up youngster, the ethical problems would still not disappear. “The parents’ choice of a genetic program for their child is associated with intentions which later take on the form of expectations addressed to the child, without, however, providing the addressee with an opportunity to take a

¹ ET 28. translated by Hella Beiter and Max Pensky. In German: “Die Verschiebung der »Grenze zwischen Zufall und freier Entscheidung«“ Habermas, *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur*, p. 54.

revisionist stand. [...]. In the life history of the person concerned, the transformed expectations turn up as a normal element of interactions, and yet elude the conditions of reciprocity required for communication proper.”¹ The essence for Habermas is that the person involved *does not have the possibility not to agree*. A few years ago Habermas held an interesting lecture on Rousseau’s *Confessions* and its message, valid for our age as well. The point of the lecture was essentially that this philosophical autobiography marked the emergence of the first modern European individual. They say that the *Confessions* do not correspond to the facts on many instances, and it contains many later embellishments. But the point is still the fact that Rousseau states: “This is me, this is my life, judge me!” It is questionable nevertheless whether our genetically modified potential “fellow humans” may say this about themselves. That what is “my life” and that what you “placed into me” seems to be intermingled once and for all in the light of the possibilities of positive eugenics. Habermas differentiates between *positive* (‘improving’) and *negative* (therapeutic) eugenics. In the case of negative eugenics the physician does not offend the dignity of the potential person. This curative intervention usually aims at the elimination of some kind of genetic disease, and the doctor operates on the *body* (Leib) of the future human being. In the case of positive eugenics however the *physician* goes through an almost unnoticed metamorphosis; he becomes a *technician*, who manipulates a *set of cells* (Körper). In fact the contra-factual, that is, retrospectively justifiable, pre-contract-like consent of the involved potential person can only be assumed in the case of the therapeutic intervention. This approach definitely expresses a general concept: who would live his/her life in illness rather than in health? At the same time, it is not easy at all to distinguish in practice between the two kinds of interventions. The application of the code of health/illness is not independent from the historically changing normative ideal of the ‘healthy man’. For instance, were it discovered that a certain gene is

¹ ET 51. translated by Hella Beiter and Max Pensky. In German: „Denn mit der Entscheidung über sein genetisches Programm haben die Eltern Absichten verbunden, die sich später in Erwartungen an das Kind verwandeln, ohne jedoch dem Adressaten die Möglichkeit zu einer *revidierenden* Stellungnahme einzuräumen. [...] Die transformierten Absichten treten innerhalb der Lebensgeschichte des Betroffenen als normaler Bestandteil von Interaktionen in Erscheinung und entziehen sich doch den Reziprozitätsbedingungen der kommunikativen Verständigung.“ Habermas, *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur*, p. 90.

‘responsible’ for a homosexual disposition, how would we judge a possible intervention? As long as homosexuality was mostly perceived as an illness, the intervention could have easily been regarded as therapeutic (negative) eugenics. But nowadays, when people increasingly tend to perceive it only as an alternative sexual behaviour, the intervention could just as well be regarded as positive or improving eugenics. (Fukuyama also refers to this example).

At any rate, it is a fact that according to Habermas autonomous morals and anthropological self-understanding must harmonize with each other. And the basis for all this is formed by the identical and unchanged character of the human race. Thomas Runkel notes that by this statement Habermas steps beyond his earlier claimed standpoint of discourse ethics, because he also includes the imperative of the recognition of the original and incidental character of human nature among the conditions of mutual recognition. The meaning of the human being’s moral actions is endowed with reason exactly because of the fact that he/she accepts the original organic imperfection and continuous vulnerability of his/her physical existence. Therefore the human being must not be regarded as an *animal rationale*, but as a *bodily-person* (Leibperson). “Moral rules are fragile constructions protecting *both* the physis from bodily injuries and the person from inner or symbolical injuries. Subjectivity, being what makes the human body a soul-possessing receptacle of the spirit, in itself constituted through intersubjective relations to others.”¹ Doubtlessly, there is much truth in this approach. It is easy to see that there could be quite some seemingly almost unsolvable difficulties in the relationship of ‘natural’ humans and the future, genetically programmed beings. Why would a ‘traditional’ subject accept the same level of solidarity with a genetically spiffed-out being than with another subject like him- or herself (in the field of health insurance for instance)? If this other being is perfect, then he or she must not be ill. Or if he or she still cares for his or her health: let him/her make a contract with those like him/her.

Nevertheless, Habermas’ argumentation also has its weak points. For instance, I consider it contradictory to ground of identity of species [Gattung] on man’s normative concept of nature, and at the same time also preserve the status of man as a free reasonable being. It is

¹ ET 33-34. Translated by Hella Beiter and Max Pensky. In German: “Moralische Ordnungen sind zerbrechliche Konstruktionen, *beides in einem* schützen, die Physis gegen körperliche und die Person gegen innere oder symbolische Verletzungen.” Habermas, *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur*, p. 63.

difficult to unify the two because the man's freedom of decision is usually connected to an *emergent* level, different from the biological level, and impossible to be directly deduced from genetic information. To put it in a somewhat popularized way, Habermas actually says that 'there is something in human nature which restricts human nature'. (Several researchers have drawn attention to the fact that Habermas' thinking over the last one or two decades shows a kind of 'Christian turn'. The analysis of this question is not the subject of this paper. Nonetheless, I still wish to mention that the fact that Habermas accepts the unconditioned original psychophysical constitution of the man and the apriority of his *inviolable* [unantastbar] nature proves indeed an involvement with Christian anthropology. This is 'naturally' accompanied by a certain degree of 're-enchantment' of human nature which Habermas – as we have seen – previously tried to avoid.)

Francis Fukuyama's recently exposed viewpoint can also be connected to the questions raised by human nature. Fukuyama warns just as much about the hasty and imprudent application of human genetics as Habermas. Of course, he sees the absolute danger in a possible state- and political use of genetic manipulation. In order to picture the size of the real problem, instead of the word *eugenics*, he proposes the use of the brutally obvious term of *breeding*. The 'softer' form of genetic manipulation based on parental decision must be regarded with at least equal anxiety – Fukuyama says.

He arranges his objections in three groups: religious; based on utilitarian ideas; and finally based on philosophical arguments.

The Jewish-Christian-Islamic tradition regards the human being as bearing the image of God (see the doctrine of *Imago Dei*, mentioned in the first part), and thus any kind of indoctrination to the outside nature 'qualifies as a revolt against divine will' and must therefore be rejected. But in a secularized world –Fukuyama says – this argument may only convince our religious fellow-beings, and therefore there is a need of another kind of approach of a secular nature. Utilitarian arguments are mostly connected to the subsidiary negative consequences. Some of the utilitarian arguments against genetic manipulation are basically identical with Habermas' arguments. For instance: "Parents may be under the sway of a contemporary fad or cultural bias or simple political correctness: one generation may prefer ultra thin girls, or pliable boys, or children with red hair—preferences that can easily fall out of favor in the next generation. One could argue that parents are already free to make such mistakes on behalf of their children and do so all the time by

miseducating them or imposing their own quirky values on them. But a child who is brought up in a certain way by a parent can rebel later. Genetic modification is more like giving your child a tattoo that she can never subsequently remove and will have to hand down not just to her own children but to all subsequent descendants.”¹

From a theoretical point of view however, the most interesting is the philosophical argument based on the universally valid definition of human nature. Fukuyama’s general thesis states that human nature itself is the normative basis for which any kind of external interference is morally unacceptable. As a completion to this thesis, he also claims: within a liberal democracy we can only mobilize effective theoretical instruments in order to ward off unlimited biotechnology by philosophical argumentation. In a chapter of his book (*Human rights*) he first attempts to unveil the counter-productive consequences of a utilitarian concept of rights. In his view, utilitarianism, by placing interests above rights, permits such a ‘rational’ calculation which would even accept, let’s say, the use of human corpses as forage, as long as it is economically profitable. Rights are much more important than interests because their moral significance is much greater. Rights, says Fukuyama, may derive from three sources: “[...] divine rights, natural rights, and what one might call contemporary positivistic rights, located in law and social custom. Rights, in other words, can emanate from God, Nature, and Man himself.”² Then, once he has discarded divine and positivist rights on account of their restricted ability to generalisation, he turns towards the presentation of the advantages of natural rights. As a first step, he argues that Hume’s famous *naturalist error* does not mean to say what people usually think about it since Moore. Because, as Fukuyama claims at least, Hume does not mean to say that one could not derive an *ought* from an *is*, but “[a]t most, what the famous passage from the *Treatise* said was that one could not deduce moral rules from empirical fact in a logically a priori way.”³ But Hume himself, in consent with all the significant thinkers of Western tradition, thought that concepts like will, joy, desire, etc. make a connection between *is* and *ought*. Of course, Kant’s deontological theory discarded human nature for the sake of moral perfection, but this is not a reason for us to completely renounce it. According to Fukuyama, despite all opposite endeavours, it is possible to

¹ Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future. Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*. London: Profile Books, 2002, pp. 93-94.

² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

give a generally valid definition of human nature. “The definition of the term *human nature* I will use here is the following: human nature is the sum of the behaviour and characteristics that are typical of the human species, arising from genetic rather than environmental factors.”¹

To continue, Fukuyama enlists the concepts which consider human nature as a social construction subject to historical conditions, some of which I have already described in the first part of my paper. Fukuyama criticises these concepts which he calls *relative*, and holds to his conviction that the man as a cultural being and his ability to moral improvement does not deny at all the thesis of a universally valid human nature. He calls that particular quality which makes human nature ‘human nature’ the *X factor*. For the liberal societies of our age, for the upholders of equality this *X factor* has the role of an absolute *limes*, and it spreads out to the entire human race, “[...] and requires equality of respect for all of those on the inside, but attributes a lower level of dignity to those outside the boundary.”² The application of genetic technology to the human being wants to erase this “bright red line”, and this might have unforeseen consequences. While the views of Peter Singer, who wished to erase the boundary between humans and animals, are relatively easy (!) to refute, Nietzsche’s vision of the *Übermensch* simply blows up the somehow still functioning organizational principles of our rationality.

Actually, in my opinion Fukuyama cannot properly define, in spite of all his struggles, what is the *X factor*. He seems to say something of the sort that the man represents a complex, organic whole to such an extent that he cannot be regarded merely as the sum of his components. Human dignity based on the *X factor* cannot be deduced from language, or reason, or sociability, or the ability to make moral decisions. But if the man, called a “complex adaptive system”, is not identical with any of his components, then there is still a need of a leap which brings about the birth of a previously inexistent quality. In this case however Fukuyama’s criticism against the Kantian standpoint stating the dual nature of the man, presented earlier, proves to be of no avail.³

Although Fukuyama clearly employs a circular reasoning, I still have to say I would very much like to agree with him. It seems to me that in trying to define the man we have to follow the method of the so-called

¹ Ibid., 130.

² Ibid., 150.

³ See also Bert Heinrichs, “Das Ende des Menschen”, *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 1 (2003): 105.

apophatic theology in its attempt to define God: apophatic (or negative) theology names the attributes *which cannot be conciliated* with the concept of God, acknowledging thus that it is incapable of a positive conceptual definition of God.

This leaves no other solution for Fukuyama than to seek the assistance of legal regulations, just like Habermas. Actually, I myself cannot think of a better solution. As long as the discussions of moral philosophy fail to offer some generally acceptable solution – I expect this will not happen soon –, let us vote for the regulating power of national and international law. Peter Sloterdijk's contrary standpoint, namely that genetic technology will work in an *auto-selective* way, that is, positive results will last, and the erroneous 'solutions' will disappear by themselves, seems to me like a risky enterprise. Legal regulation seems more feasible yet, even at the expense of the harm done to human curiosity and the autonomy of scientific research.

Translated by Emese G. Czintos