

Compassion as transcendence  
A new approach in bioethics

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***Introduction: „person“ in western bioethics***

In the following lecture, I don't want to deal with the *epistemological* theory of reductionism itself. Rather, I will ask for the ethical consequences and implications of reductionisms in current bioethical debates.

I will act from the assumption that the concept of personhood acquired in most of nowadays *bioethical* discussions (1) represents an illegitimate ethical reductionism which (2) is the expression of ongoing cultural processes or, to be more concrete, is the expression of a cultural projection. The resulting bioethical concept of personhood leads to undecidable bioethical situations. (3) I will therefore argue that this concept of personhood needs to be complemented and broadened towards a *theory of compassion* which embraces all relevant functions of humanity.

It is important to add that these statements are true (as I will attempt to show in the following) at least *in Western discourses*. It is necessary to make this modification because the concept of person does not seem to play such an important role in Eastern Indian philosophy. To compare these traditions, our LSI-group "BIOS – boundary questions of Life" has started the interdisciplinary project "Non-personal foundation of the right to life. Comparatistic and interdisciplinary aspects with special regard to Buddhism and Neo-Konfuzianism" at the University of Mainz. This project aims to compare the Western person-focused discourse traditions with nonpersonal Indian approaches.<sup>1</sup>

***(1) Personhood as illegitimate ethical reductionism (IER)***

In the methodology of both natural sciences and the life sciences, reductionism plays an important *methodical* role. Reductionism is an important *methodical tool*

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see [www.inter-bios.de](http://www.inter-bios.de).

to make new empirical theories possible roughly spoken either by *reducing complexity* or by reducing a certain phenomenon to one or more other phenomena which are easier to operationalize, that is, which is easier to be studied and analyzed.

Methodical reductionism, therefore, can be considered to be a special kind of *model* for real-life problems. If we, for example, ask for the concept of “Life” in Natural or Life sciences, it certainly makes sense to split this complex concept into properties of smaller content such as reproduction, metabolism, evolutionability etc. This kind of reduction is closer to be characterized as a *strong Micro-Reductionism*.<sup>2</sup> We don’t have to deal then with *complex system properties* (“Systemeigenschaften”) but instead, we deal with *one property* of Life, namely to be able to reproduce or to have a metabolism. And this Micro-Reductionism has proven to be extremely fruitful in the natural or life sciences over the last one and a half centuries.

However, when it comes to questions concerning human identity and/or bioethical problems, reductionism can lead to an *illegitimate ethical reductionism* (IER) and *can* thus cause manifold ethical problems and in fact it *does* cause them. A reductionism that is approvable and might be even extremely helpful *in natural sciences* might turn out to bear counterintuitive and even highly inhuman consequences *in ethics*. In other words: the fact that a reductionism is approvable and helpful in natural sciences does not imply that it is also in ethics. For example: Nobody would deny that *from a biological point of view* homo sapiens belongs to the group of mammals such as apes, monkeys, cats, dogs, rats, rabbits, and others. Therefore, humans react to certain stimuli in a very similar way as for example rats do. For this reason, it does (from a biological point of view) make sense to use rats for medical experimentation instead of humans.

Yet, *from an ethical point of view* there might be strong objections against this practice. And even if you personally don’t share these objections, just go one step further and ask yourself whether or not you would be willing to cruelly torture a creature, say a number of rabbits, cats or even dogs in order to test new beauty products. I guess the answer would be no in most cases, and for a good reason. At this point, I don’t want to discuss the question whether or not it is legitimate to use

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<sup>2</sup> Mahner/Bunge (2000: 110).

animals for drug tests or not. There are good arguments for both sides, so this issue is really hard to decide. My point is: The fact that human reactions to certain stimuli are in many aspects *reducible* to rat's reactions to the same stimuli *makes it rational* to use rats instead of humans *if we agree* that it is less harmful to kill a rat than a human. But this being rational does not make the *ethical decision* whether or not one of these animals should be used for drug tests easier to decide. If we use the scientist reduction human → ape as a ground for an ethical decision, that is simply a mistake of categories.

As this example shows, IER's are mostly to be phrased in the following way:

"A is (at least in some/many aspects) *nothing else* than B, *and therefore* we are allowed to do (or ought to do) C".

The first logical connection "A is (at least in some/many aspects) *nothing else* than B" represents what I will call the *reductionist premise*, the second logical connection "*and therefore* we are allowed to do (or ought to do) C" I will call its *ethical implications*.

So for example: A rabbit's eye is in many aspects *nothing else than* a human eye, *and therefore* we ought to use it for tests rather than a man.

Or: Personality is *nothing else but* brain activity, *and therefore* we should investigate these brain activities rather than human behavior (because they are less complex).

Now, my thesis is that an *illegitimate ethical reductionism* (IER) is a wrong or unwanted ethical implication deriving from reductionist premises.

One example for such a kind of misled and therefore *illegitimate* ethical reductionism (IER) is the concept of a human individual as a *possessor of genes carrying certain properties* (claim 1). Ever since the breakthrough of the human genome project, the discussion on human identity has considerably changed. Human identity is nowadays largely described firstly as a *set of properties* which are secondly *provided by genes*. The characteristics of human identity are thus reduced to *information*. This type of *IER* can be properly described as *informationism*.

The same informationism is to be found when some exponents of the recent philosophy of biology try to explain life in a biological sense as a mere *arrangement of information* (claim 2).<sup>3</sup> Here, the underlying reductionist premise is: “Life is *nothing else but* logical information”. One of the ethical implications of this premise is “... *and therefore* some computer viruses have to be considered as (and must be treated as) being alive because they exhibit the same properties as living creatures”. This is a claim that some exponents of the hard version of the *Artificial Life*-research actually make.<sup>4</sup>

A graver ethical question deriving from an IER is the question for personhood in recent “Western” *bioethical discussions*. Here, personhood has often been understood as an *ensemble of cognitive capabilities* (claim 3).

This set of properties or abilities is said to characterize human identity in contrast to non-human animal creatures. A small choice of these properties is:

- Being able to *reflect* in a *rational* manner
- Being *aware* of its/his/her own existence
- Having second-order *beliefs* and/or *interests*<sup>5</sup>
- Being able to use a *verbal language* [a very disputable difference]
- Being able to *manufacture* (and *use*) *tools*
- Being aware of its/his/her own lethality.

Depending on which of these abilities an author holds to be characteristic for being a person, it is questionable (1) whether *every human* is a person at any given point and (2) whether *only humans* are persons.

In his famous and highly disputed book “Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethics”, Peter Singer has made the claim that some higher developed animals (such as certain primates) are to be considered as persons whereas some groups of humans (people in the persistent vegetative state, pvs) are not persons in the same sense and should therefore not to be treated and

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<sup>3</sup> Kueppers (1986).

<sup>4</sup> See Langton (1989).

<sup>5</sup> That is a highly interesting claim. Second-order interests can conflict with first-order interests – for example a drug addict might on this second-order level come to the conclusion that it is better for him to stop consuming drugs *even though* he is badly willing to continue consuming them on the first level. This insight gives him at least *the ability* to change his habits – and this is certainly something no animal, in my opinion, is able to do. I leave it to your judgment whether or not we always do what we have recognized is better for us, but we are at least able to do so.

privileged as such. This highly counterintuitive claim shows the problematical philosophical implications of Singer's *IEM*: If the definition of a person is *reduced* to the determination that a "person" is simply the carrier of certain cognitive capabilities such as self-awareness, self-reflection, and others, then it is *impossible* to decide why a highly evolved animal should not be considered as a person. Yet, most of us have the strong intuition that even though animals should be saved from cruel torturing, they will *never* be what every human being already *is* and *means* to us (even after his death).

In other words: taking the reductionist *model* as a proper scientific *description* of human self-understanding represents a classical mistake of categories. The intense discussion on personhood initiated by the thesis of P. Singer has shown that the reduction "a person is *nothing else but* a holder of certain properties" is at least problematic because it leads to strongly counterintuitive conclusions. The problems we have in the bioethical fields of euthanasia and animal ethics illustrate the mistaking ethical implication of the beginning.

## ***(2) IER's as expression of ongoing cultural processes***

All of the above mentioned examples illustrate that the philosophical concept of "person" is facing a *fundamental crisis*. This crisis is not only the result of a philosophical analysis but of changes in the real "life-world" ("Lebenswelt" in German).<sup>6</sup>

Let me explain this German term real quick. "Lebenswelt" is a concept introduced into the philosophical discussion by the German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl. In Husserl's terminology, Lebenswelt roughly spoken refers to the real world experience we make by leading or everyday life. Lebenswelt thus refers to a field of phenomenology of every-day experience. These "Lebenswelt"-experiences also shape the way we understand *ourselves* and we understand *science*.

Therefore, my second thesis is: The fact that most philosophers nowadays tend to define a "person" an ensemble of cognitive capabilities is merely a projection of the

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<sup>6</sup> This term represents the insufficient attempt to translate the German term "Lebenswelt" into English. In German, Husserl's term "Lebenswelt" refers (roughly spoken) to the real cultural world human individuals are living in, thus enabling all kinds of human references: Cp. Husserl (1954).

“Lebenswelt” (life-world), or, to put it a less phenomenologist way, a *projection from the predominant forms of scientific and social practice*.

This is easiest to be shown by an analysis of claim (2): The claim that person is “*nothing else but*” information (a claim that is, besides, *not* agreed upon by most of the biologists) is a direct projection from a type of society which claims that virtually everything is reducible to information. This does not mean that the reduction of the biological phenomenon “life” to “information” could not be fruitful in a scientific way. However, when transferred to an ethical level, this reduction proves to be an *IER* causing manifold theoretical problems concerning the way in which a human individual understands herself or himself. *If a human individual understands both his own and the other’s personality as “nothing but” information or as “nothing but” a cluster of cognitive capabilities, it is impossible to develop a positive relation to oneself or to others.* And in fact, it is obvious that we *never* perceive persons in such a way – neither in regard to ourselves nor in regard to fellow humans.

This *socially inspired* projection of the concept of information into the self-understanding of man as a person has highly insightful historical parallels in the evolution of 19<sup>th</sup> century Life sciences. Between 1854 and 1870, a wide-spread discussion on materialism took place among scientists and philosophers. In the focus of this discussion stood the question for reductionism, its methodological value and the outcome for human self-understanding. The advocates of the reductionist point of view (Vogt, Moleschott, Buechner, later Helmholtz and Boltzmann) claimed that life should be completely reducible to chemistry and physics. Even thoughts were claimed to be “nothing else but” chemical reactions in the brain, therefore all educational programs should start with the human diet (“You are, what you eat”).<sup>7</sup>

As this historical analogy with the materialism-debate shows, it is at any given time the predominant social paradigm that is projected into self-interpretation of man. Just as the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s materialists in Germany claimed that life is “nothing else but” chemistry and physics, the advocates of a nowadays *IER* claim that a person is “nothing else but” a carrier of certain abilities. Looking at the debate on

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<sup>7</sup> For a closer analysis of that discussion see Solies (2008).

animal ethics (at least in Western traditions), it is noticeable that these debates are mostly focused on the question which *rights* animals should have. Even though I cannot prove this thesis at this point, I like to utter the impression that this rights-focused debate is the direct outcome of a society in which every interaction is based on (and ruled by) *enforceable laws*. This leads to a situation where the alternative *seems to be the* following: “*Either* we grant animals with certain rights *or* we are allowed do with them whatever we can”. But this is not the proper alternative, as I shall point out in the last chapter.

The fundamental crisis the concept of person is facing shows first and foremost in the bioethical questions raised by new bio-technologies and by the problem of the legitimacy of euthanasia. In Europe, these discussions are widely dominated by the (apparently dilemmatic) alternative of two doctrines: the *equivalence doctrine* and the *non-equivalence doctrine*. Whereas the equivalence doctrine claims the concepts of “person” and “human individual” to be identical (which means that every human individual is a person at any given time and without an exception), the non-equivalence doctrine claims the opposite, namely (a) that there persons who are not human (e.g. higher evolved primates) and on the other hand (b): there are human individuals who are not persons (and thus should not be treated as such). From (a) derive central claims of the *animal rights*-movement (Singers criticism of “speciesism”), (b) leads to highly problematic and highly counterintuitive claims when it comes to the question how to treat humans at the end of their Life, especially humans in *persistent vegetative state* (PVS). If they are not considered being a person, then their lives are not to be protected as humans. This is plainly a very inhuman claim, caused by a misconception of the term “person”. A second inhumanity derives from the focusing on the concept of person in animal ethics. Clearly, it would be a good reason to protect certain animals from cruel torturing if they were considered to be a person. But what about the animals nobody would claim to be a person in this sense just like cats and dogs? And if we invent different bioethical categories for those animals to be protected, this simply means that the notion of personhood is *not* the deciding argument.

### ***(3) Towards a theory of compassion***

The above mentioned bioethical problems need to be reviewed from a positive theory of (human) life. What does it mean and what does it take to lead a meaningful life? To answer this question, it is important to view the individual human being not only as such but in close connection both with his fellow humans and within the timely horizon of his own transitoriness and moribundity. Both moments point to the determination of man as a creature standing within a genetic line.<sup>8</sup> Thus, to lead a meaningful life not simply means *to be alive* in a biological way or to be able to fulfill certain cognitive actions but *to be principally able to lead a meaningful life*. To lead a meaningful life means for example to have parents, to be brought up, to know about the future, especially to be aware of the death, *and to be able to feel with other creatures*.

In my opinion, it is especially this *compassion*, this ability to *feel with* other creatures that characterizes a meaningful Life. In our interdisciplinary project “Non-personality and compassion”, our research group is trying to point out a way to base a proper ethical understanding of the treatment of both animals *and* humans not on *personal rights* but on this human ability of *compassion*.

Thus, to lead a meaningful life means to be able to compassionate, to be in a permanent communicative connection and exchange with others. To be compassionate firstly means to be among other persons, to recognize oneself in the other’s face and behavior, to acknowledge the other and to be acknowledged by him or her. It is this exchange of acknowledgement that has first been analyzed by G. W. F. Hegel in his *phenomenology of mind*.<sup>9</sup> Recent philosophers have tried to define a person over capabilities and properties such as self-consciousness, capability of epistemic differentiation, but also emotive expression, communication, education, consciousness of time, situation-independent language, and emotional and/or social relationship.<sup>10</sup> All of these approaches seem to point in the same (or at least in a very similar) direction: the concept of personhood is

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<sup>8</sup> This term “genus” is used *in analogy with* the biological determination of genus, yet it is on no account reducible to biological categories. In this non-reductive sense, to be a part of a genus does mean to stand in a long line of cultural evolution and to stay in close connection to other human beings.

<sup>9</sup> Cp. Hegel: *Phaenomenologie des Geistes*, chapter „Selbststaendigkeit und Unselbststaendigkeit des Selbstbewußtseins; Herrschaft und Knechtschaft“.

<sup>10</sup> Dworkin (1994), Parfit (1984), Sturma (1997).

less and less identified with the ability of certain cognitive acts but more and more with a human individual understood as a relational creature<sup>11</sup> being able to interrelate with other creatures in concrete acts: *to be a person means to be with other persons and to interact with them in manifold communicative and affective ways.*

It is this concept that we tried to express with the artificial German term “Mitsein” (compassion). Unfortunately, the German language has no positive term that refers to the ability to feel with the other person *in a neutral or a positive way*. We do have words like “Mitleid” (sympathy) or “Mitgefühl” but they all refer to the ability to share the other one’s *grief and suffering*, not the other one’s *positive feelings* as well. One might be tempted to see this as an expression of a general German misanthropy (and that is certainly true in Schopenhauer’s case). At the same time, it was just Schopenhauer who exactly analyzed this “Mitleid” and who showed that “Mitleid” is not simply the illusion to suffer “in the other one’s place”. Schopenhauer’s argument against this misconception of “Mitleid” is, in my opinion, quite convincing. Schopenhauer says: Imagine a beggar sitting at the side of the road. If sympathy would simply be based upon the illusion to suffer in the other one’s place, then my sympathy would be greater the worse my own situation is because the sympathy for the other would add to my own suffering. It is obvious that this is not the case. My sympathy is greater, says Schopenhauer, *the better my own situation is*. When I’m in a comfortable position myself, then my sympathy would be greater, not when I’m suffering from very similar circumstances. Therefore, Mitleid (sympathy) cannot be based upon such an illusion. Rather, it is based upon the metaphysical “Mitsein” (compassion) which primarily means to *be with others* in a metaphysical, empathic and existentialistic way and secondly *implies or prepares* a notion of “Mitleid” (sympathy). Thus, the notion of “Mitsein” refers to a concrete relationship to others as a ground for personhood. In Western philosophy, Arthur Schopenhauer was the first philosopher to view compassion as a ground for an ethical behavior towards the fellow humans. Interestingly, his approach has for a long time remained insular and isolated within Western ethics. Almost one century later, the 1952 Nobel Prize winner Albert Schweitzer has

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<sup>11</sup> German: Beziehungswesen, lat. *praedicament relationis*.

worked out an ethical approach that aims into a very similar direction. Schweitzer's central ethical insight is formulated as follows: "I am Life that wants to live surrounded by Life that wants to live". Thus, both Schopenhauer and Schweitzer hint at the necessity to develop an ethical approach that is not only focused on humans but also on animals. But it was only in the last two decades that philosophers have seized this approach with regard to nowadays ethical problems such as animal ethics.

It is exactly this concept of compassion that seems to be crucial for an alternative Buddhist concept of non-personhood. The central point of this paper is that in order to really understand the meaning of compassion, we need an interdisciplinary and intercultural approach of compassion. This is what we are going to sketch out in our intercultural project on Non-personality. Since I'm not an expert in Indian philosophy myself, I'm not the right person to explain the conceptual connection between compassion (karuna) and Nonpersonality in Indian thought myself.

This would have been the duty of my colleagues Michael Gerhard and Eberhard Guhe whose papers have not been accepted for this conference. The more I'm glad to have met here philosophers, theologians, and neuroscientists from all over the world going in a very similar direction.

Let me come to my conclusion: The notion of a person as used nowadays in the bioethical context causes more problems than it solves. We do not know what a person is, therefore we define a list of properties or abilities we would like to protect and call the carrier of these properties a person. Subsequently, a good deal of nowadays bioethical discussions focuses on the question what or who should be considered being a person and for what reason. By stressing the meaning of compassion, I have tried in this paper to show an alternative to this practice: The ability to compassionate with others. Compassion is a highly promising research field for philosophy, theology, and apparently even for neurosciences.

Compassion is *not* an *ethical imperative*, it does not tell us how we *should* be and how we *should* act. Instead, it can show us – and that is Schopenhauer's point just as Schweitzer's – how we *already are*, how we already feel, and that the

individualistic way to see oneself is simply a misconceptual myth, a deception, that leads to loss of own identity and to more suffering.

Or, how Schweitzer puts it:

“It is not out of benevolence for others that I am gentle, peaceable, long-suffering and friendly but because in this behavior I prove the deepest self-assertion”.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> ASGW 2, 385: „Nicht aus Gutmütigkeit gegen andere bin ich sanftmütig, friedfertig langmütig und freundlich, sondern weil ich in diesem Verhalten die tiefste Selbstbehauptung bewähre“.

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