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Revisiting the Foundations of Bioethics: Prospects of a Sino-Christian Discourse

Gerhold K. BECKER

Abstract

Biomedicine and biotechnology challenge traditional human self-understanding and thus call for a cross-cultural re-assessment of our ethical foundations. Searching for common moral resources, I will chart possible intersections between (secular) bioethics, Christian ethics, and Chinese (bio)ethics. While the cross-cultural discourse on "Western" ethics has typically been based on the assumption that the two moral traditions are incompatible and that alternative projects of Chinese (Confucian) bioethics are justified and called for, the possibility of a fruitful dialogue between Chinese and Christian ethics has been largely ignored. In the absence of a real dialogue its projection is highly speculative, but it may be a worthwhile undertaking in view of a possible "co-operation" towards a new bioethics that can meet the global challenges. Against this background, Chinese (bio)ethicists may be expected to take an interest in an ethical tradition that would otherwise be of relevance only to Chinese Christians.

Beginning with sketching out three major challenges to traditional bioethics, I will address the conditions and methodology of a cross-cultural discourse between the Christian and the Chinese moral traditions. On this basis, I will then seek to identify particular conceptions of Christian ethics that may be promising candidates for a critical dialogue with Chinese ethics. I suggest that the envisaged

Gerhold K. BECKER is regular visiting professor in the Graduate School of Philosophy and Religion, Assumption University of Thailand, Bangkok.

re-assessment of the foundations of bioethics in China could benefit from Judeo-Christian views on human dignity, personhood, suffering, and mortality, particularly, if they could be appropriately translated into the language of public reason.

I. SETTING THE SCENE

In his ground-breaking book *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* Wilfrid Sellars noted that "in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not."[1] This naturalistic world view is not only characteristic of the natural sciences but is also the dominant feature of modern biomedicine. Naturalism describes the world exclusively in terms of events that can be interpreted through models of causal explanation. These models are not restricted to physics but have been increasingly extended to the life world of human beings.

For Leon R. Kass, chairman of President George W. Bush's committee on bioethics,

> [the] most fundamental challenge posed by the brave new biology comes […] from the underlying scientific thought. In order effectively to serve the needs of human life, modern biology reconstructed the nature of the organic body, representing it not as something animated, purposive and striving, but as dead matter-in-motion. This reductive science has given us enormous power, but it offers no standards to guide its use. Worse, it challenges our self-understanding as creatures of dignity, rendering us incapable of recognizing dangers to our humanity that arise from the very triumphs biology has made.[2]

The most representative of the scientific paradigm and its naturalistic background assumptions is genetics. Its implications are not restricted to biomedicine, but directly concern our self-understanding and

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[1] Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Robert Brandom (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 173.

[2] Leon R. Kass, *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002), 20.

our place in the *Great Chain of Being* (Arthur O. Lovejoy). I briefly list three of the most significant ones:

(1) The increased use of molecular genetics as the sole model of explaining and understanding disease, defining therapeutic practice, and determining health policies is not simply a new phase in medicine but a profound paradigm shift. Genetic models of explanation are becoming more and more powerful and gain significant influence "in medical disciplines and practices that were previously unrelated to genetics." Medicine is being transformed from a form of art, the art of healing, to an exact laboratory science. What has been called the "genetification of medicine" affects the concept of disease as well as the traditional doctor-patient relationship.[3]

(2) Advances in the neurosciences, human genetics, evolutionary biology, and information technologies have begun to blur the distinction between the natural and the cultural and seek to reduce the latter to the former. Increasingly, evolutionary nature is turned into an artificially constructed product, since genetics seems to hold the prospect of manipulating and enhancing human nature to our own desires and preferences. Sociobiologists like Edward O. Wilson expect that the new genetics is bound to lead humanity beyond the natural lottery and to bring evolution under our own control. The advent of genetic medicine and biotechnology marks a new evolutionary period: for the first time, he predicts, it will be possible for humans to "gain conscious control over their heredity" and to suppress "stabilizing selection." It is expected that this development will soon take us to the age of "volitional evolution" when, for the first time in human history, we alone will be in charge of our destiny.[4]

(3) For Allen Buchanan and his co-authors the greatest challenge to human self-understanding is that "we can no longer assume that there will be a single successor to what has been regarded as human nature." In the future, they write in their book with the programmatic title *From Chance to Choice*, it is highly likely that different groups of human beings "each with its own 'nature'" will "follow divergent paths of development […] just as there are now different species of animals who evolved from common ancestors through random mutation and natural

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[3] Lene Koch, "Predictive Genetic Medicine: A New Concept of Disease," in *Genetics in Human Reproduction*, eds. Elisabeth Hildt and Sigrid Graumann (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 185–195.

[4] Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 275.

selection."[5] Then the age of transhumanism will have arrived. Transhumanists believe that human nature is "work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remould in desirable ways." With the help of biotechnology "we shall eventually manage to become post-human, beings with vastly greater capacities than present human beings have."[6] As the biotech industry explicitly configures biology as a technology, a commodity, and as economic property, it transforms life into an object at our disposal.[7] Apparently, we are about "to determine not simply who will live and who will die, but what all those in the future will be like."[8]

It is obvious that such a trajectory towards a science-induced future raises fundamental questions about the place of human beings in nature and about what—if anything—makes them special. In times of globalization, these challenges are not restricted to Western societies but concern Asian nations alike; they are particularly urgent for a China on the rise and competing in biotechnological development with the West.

In view of such issues one may recall that some thirty years ago, at the beginning of the genetic revolution, Hans Jonas was doubtful whether traditional ethics had sufficient resources to successfully confront them.[9] In particular, he questioned what he regarded as the uncritical background assumption of modern science, and to a large extent also of modern ethics, that is, the belief in an almost infinite perfectibility of nature in the service of the technological imperative. In the meantime, climate change, the nuclear crisis, exploitation of natural resources, environmental destruction and above all the genetic revolution have exacerbated the problems and generated a new sensitivity for limitations and the finiteness of human nature. Modern visions of human quasi-omnipotence and its associated trust in the technological fix have been subjected to a thorough re-assessment that may call for a new sense of humility that would not be ashamed of its religious gene-

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[5] Allen Buchanan et al., *From Chance to Choice: Genetics and Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). See also: Allen Buchanan, "Human Nature and Enhancement," *Bioethics* 23, no. 3 (2009): 141–150.

[6] Nick Bostrom, "Human Genetic Enhancements: A Transhumanist Perspective," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 37 (2003): 493–506.

[7] Eugene Thacker, *The Global Genome: Biotechnology, Politics, and Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 46–47.

[8] Justine Burley and John Harris, eds., *Companion to Genethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 2.

[9] Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

alogy. It may finally have dawned on us that our technological and economic self-confidence has met its challenge and that a sober re-assessment of our true place in nature must begin with our taking stock of humanity's major moral traditions.

It is not without irony that the enormous achievements of biotechnology and biomedicine should revive the age-old philosophical question Kant thought was at the basis of all theoretical, practical, and religious thought: "What is man?" "What constitutes our humanity?" In a post-metaphysical age, this question is an embarrassment rather than a challenge, but nevertheless unavoidable. At issue is no longer whether we want to confront it but how to respond to it. Do we want to implicitly delegate our human future to the competing interests of research laboratories, or to the market, which increasingly becomes the major driving force in the biosciences, or can we still assert moral authority over a future that is about to slip off our hands?[10] Maybe we have already crossed our genetic Rubicon and can only morally ameliorate the dictates of science and technology, but no longer define their goals in accordance with our moral vision. To put this more dramatically: we have to face up to the question whether we have indeed reached the stage where humanity can assume the role of *possessor et dominus mundi* as Descartes predicted, or whether we are merely the "sorcerer's apprentices" (J. W. v. Goethe) who—in Wilson's rather poetical language—have finally heard the true voice of Mephistopheles.[11]

What we need then are strategies for developing principles and norms that will allow us to make normative decisions about how we want to shape our human future.[12] Although this would involve the full range of the humanities, in the present context we could make a start by exploring the possibility for a cross-cultural discourse about the moral visions of the Chinese and Christian traditions for a genuinely humane society.

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[10] Bartha Maria Knoppers, Marie Hirtle and Kathleen Cranley Glass, "Commercialization of Genetic Research and Public Policy," *Science* 286, 5448 (1999): 2277–2278. Lisa S. Cahill, "Genetics, Theology, Common Good," in *Genetics, Theology, and Ethics*, ed. Lisa S. Cahill (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 117–135.

[11] Wilson, *Consilience*, 277.

[12] Eudardo Mendieta, "Habermas on Human Cloning: The Debate on the Future of the Species," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 30, no. 5–6 (2004): 721–743, 725. Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2002).

This would call for a comprehensive, in-depth, and respectful dialogue whose participants are committed to truth and prepared to learn from each other with open minds. We should be mindful that moral values and norms are always embedded in comprehensive systems of meaning that have preserved substantial intuitions of who we are as human beings and to what we may aspire. They reach deep into the collective memory of humankind and keep alive insights that continue to provide orientation, value, and meaning.

II. CONTEMPORARY WESTERN AND CHINESE BIOETHICS

Bioethics as a specific discipline dates back only to the early seventies of the last century, when advancements in science and technology posed unprecedented problems that challenged the traditional ethics of the medical profession. Three factors played a crucial role in this development: firstly, the gradual erosion of professional medicine originally grounded in a clearly defined ethos dating back to Hippocrates' twin principles of *bonum facere* and *nil nocere*. Secondly, the globalization of medicine and biotechnology that called for ethical guidance and legal regulation; and lastly, the rapidly widening scope in the application of scientific discoveries in biology and the health sciences that re-directed the ethical debate to the fundamental aims of medicine within the larger contexts of individual human life, nature, and society. Bioethics emerged "against the backdrop of a fragmentation of moral perspective and vision" that once provided the foundation for a shared system of moral values.[13]

The term "bioethics" seems to suggest "a coherent body of principles and methods appropriate to the analysis of some particular subject matter."[14] Yet it is comprised of "a mélange of disciplines" that seek to address the moral implications of a variety of issues in the life sciences, particularly in the context of human life, medicine, and healthcare. The following five clusters are most representative of the types of issues bioethics of both Western and Chinese provenance has to tackle: (1)

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[13] Tristram H. Engelhardt, Jr., *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics* (Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger, 2000), 4.

[14] Albert Jonsen, *The Birth of Bioethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 342, 345.

issues at the beginning of life (including reproductive technology, abortion, and the moral status of the embryo); (2) issues at the end of life (including issues of care for the terminally ill and euthanasia), (3) issues arising in the context of biotechnology, genetics, and bio-engineering (particularly issues of gene therapy and genetic enhancement), (4) issues in public health care policy, resource allocation, and financing, and lastly (5) conceptual, foundational, and methodological issues of bioethics and its implicit claim for universal validity.

Although by now it comes in many shapes, in its historic formation bioethics has been charged to reflect "a particularly American version of a liberal democratic ethos with its special emphasis on individual autonomy and personal rights."[15] Its most influential form translates this ethos into a single set of four mid-level *prima facie* principles. They are centered in the principle of respect for autonomy that is supposed to establish "a stalwart right of authority to control one's personal destiny," but is not regarded as "the only source of moral obligations and rights."[16]

It is doubtful that the ethical basis of the dominant model of bioethics is sufficiently broad to confront the whole cluster of fundamental issues contemporary biomedicine has raised and that are typically exemplified by regenerative medicine and genetic enhancement. In particular, it has been challenged from within Western ethics and from outside for its narrow normative basis in the conception of autonomy and individual liberty that seems to absorb all space for other values that would reflect the embeddedness of human beings in the rich fabrics of particular moral traditions and world-views. While European bioethics largely adopted the principles-approach, it has been sensitive to reductionist interpretations of autonomy. A major research project funded by the European Commission recommended therefore in its final report entitled *Basic Ethical Principles in Bioethics and Biolaw, 1995–1998* a different set of principles. Although it too prioritizes autonomy, it substitutes the principles of dignity, integrity, and vulnera-

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[15] Tristram H. Engelhardt, Jr., "Introduction: Bioethics as a Global Phenomenon," in *Regional Perspectives in Bioethics*, eds. John F. Peppin and Mark J. Cherry (Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger, 2003), xv.

[16] Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 126.

bility for non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice of the American model and thus considerably broadens the bioethical basis.[17]

There is an obvious tendency in contemporary bioethics to reduce the ethical justification of all medical activity to assuring personal autonomy and the protection of individual rights.[18] The frequent appeal to the moral theories of Mill and Kant in support of this view conflates their fundamental differences in the conceptions of autonomy and individual liberty. While for Mill autonomy means self-protection as "the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number,"[19] Kant sees in it the ground of moral obligation, since only autonomous beings can act on principles of reason. From a Kantian perspective, autonomy would be misconstrued if it were exclusively interpreted as a principle of non-interference or self-protection and not also as the principle that requires us to "choose only in such a way that the maxims of [our] choice are also included as universal law in the same volition."[20] From this perspective it is doubtful that the question of genetic enhancement should exclusively be left to the individual to decide on the basis of a utilitarian calculation that on balance benefits the majority of those concerned.

The project of communitarian ethics has reminded us that moral norms are always integrated in and expressions of a comprehensive vision of the good life that resists its reduction to a few abstract principles. Even Beauchamp has acknowledged that the principles of bioethics can only "order, classify, and group moral norms that need additional content and specificity."[21] Yet, it seems that content and specificity presuppose shared moral background assumptions on which any decent society depends. The Christian and the Chinese world-views represent religiously and culturally embedded

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[17] Jacob Dahl Rendtorff and Peter Kemp, *Basic Ethical Principles in European Bioethics and Biolaw*, vol. 1, *Autonomy, Dignity, Integrity, and Vulnerability* (Copenhagen: Center for Ethics and Law, 2000).

[18] Angus Dawson, "The Future of Bioethics: Three Dogmas and a Cup of Hemlock," *Bioethics* 24, no. 5 (2010): 218–225.

[19] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 13.

[20] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals*, *Kants Gesammelte Schriften* [Kant's Collected Writings], vol. 4, 440, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 89.

[21] Charles A. Erin, "Who Needs 'the Four Principles'?" in *Scratching the Surface of Bioethics*, eds. Matti Häyry and Tuija Takala (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 79–90, 85.

multi-dimensional systems of value and meaning that can broaden the basis for moral orientation.

The development of a specifically Chinese bioethics reflects the emergence of bioethics in the West, particularly in the US, and is a direct yet critical response to it.[22] Three characteristics of this type of bioethics are noteworthy.

Firstly, Chinese bioethics is communitarian in focus, with its own hierarchical order of moral values and norms. Although the principles of "beneficence, respect, justice, and solidarity are widely accepted"—as one of the pioneers of Chinese bioethics, Qiu Renzong 邱仁宗, who wrote the first book on bioethics in 1987, has argued—it is not the principle of autonomy, particularly in terms of individual rights, that is given priority, but the principle of beneficence.[23] Chinese bioethics is neither individualistic nor egalitarian, but experientially placed within a phenomenology of socially lived values and normative relationships revolving like concentric circles around family, community, and the larger society. Consequently, issues such as informed consent and the truthful disclosure of a potentially disturbing diagnosis to a patient that are paradigmatic requirements of autonomy-centered bioethics are placed within the larger context of social relationships within the family.[24] In the "Confucian tradition, family relations provide the moral paradigm for all significant relationships, including the political and economic."[25]

Secondly, it understands itself as firmly rooted in a virtue-based ethos of self-cultivation that establishes medicine as the art of humaneness with *ren* 仁 at its center. It enjoins respect for human life and for the individual patient who is to be treated without regard to economic or social standing, but like a relative.[26] Healthcare personnel

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[22] Fan Ruiping, ed., *Confucian Bioethics* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999).

[23] Qiu Renzong, "China: Views of a Bioethicist," in Dorothy C. Wertz and John C. Fletcher, *Genetics and Ethics in Global Perspective* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004), 187–207, 193.

[24] Li Hongwen and Cong Yali, "The Development and Perspectives of Chinese Bioethics," *Journal International de Bioéthique* [International Journal of Bioethics] 19, no. 4 (2008): 21–32. Fan Ruiping, "Self-Determination vs. Family-Determination: Two Incommensurable Principles of Autonomy," *Bioethics* 11, no. 3–4 (1997): 309–322.

[25] Richard Madsen, "Ethics and the Family: China/West," in *Chinese Ethics in a Global Context: Moral Bases of Contemporary Societies*, eds. Karl-Heinz Pohl and Anselm W. Müller (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 279–300, 283.

[26] Sun Simiao says, "Whoever comes to seek cure must be treated like your own relatives regardless of their social status, family economic conditions, appearances, ages, races, and mental abilities." Sun Simiao, *The Essential Prescriptions worth a Thou-*

are expected to acquire appropriate moral dispositions to habitually act on objective, socially tangible conceptions of the good and its ideal of harmonious interrelationships. Yet the effects of capitalism and the market economy on the traditional system of medicine and healthcare have begun to erode the Confucian ethos as well as its transformation into the "principle of socialist medical morality" with its general appeal "to rescue the dying, heal the wounded, prevent illness, cure disease, implement revolutionary humanism, and maintain the health of the people wholeheartedly."[27] Faced with increasing complaints about a deterioration of the physician-patient relationship, contemporary Chinese bioethics acknowledges the necessity to back up the moral ideal of virtuous self-cultivation with professional ethics codes and specific regulations of medical practice.

Thirdly, Chinese bioethics is skeptical about the claims of universal validity of bioethical principles and instead advocates a culturally based medical ethics that allows for moral pluralism. On the assumption that "[b]ioethical paradigms in different moral communities or cultures are incommensurable," it is claimed that no "meta-criterion" exists by which the "relative merits of different bioethical paradigms" could be judged. In its extreme form, Chinese bioethics maintains "that there is no common moral authority, no common moral norm, and no common vision with which to evaluate an action taken by a person or an institution from different moral communities or cultures."[28] While Chinese bioethics is clearly rooted in a moral tradition that prioritizes values differently from "the West," its claim of incommensurability is not only problematic and potentially self-defeating, but also ignores the enormous diversity of bioethical views within one and the same culture and underestimates the implications of relativism for normative ethics.[29] Though it is certainly difficult to clearly define what separates

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sand Gold, quoted in Zhang Daqing and Cheng Zhifan, "Medicine is a Humane Art: The Basic Principles of Professional Ethics in Chinese Medicine," *Hastings Center Report* 30, no. 4 (Jul–Aug 2000): S8–S12, S9.

[27] Cong Yali, "Bioethics in China," in Peppin and Cherry, *Regional Perspectives in Bioethics*, 246.

[28] Qiu Renzong, "The Tension Between Biomedical Technology and Confucian Values," in *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on the (Im)possibility of Global Bioethics*, ed. Julia Tao (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), 71–88, 84.

[29] Nie Jingbao, "The Plurality of Chinese and American Medical Moralities: Toward an Interpretive Cross-Cultural Bioethics," *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 10, no. 3 (2000): 239–260, 250. Nie Jingbao and Alastair V. Campbell, "Multiculturalism and Asian Bioethics: Cultural War or Creative Dialogue?" *Bioethical Inquiry* 4 (2007): 163–167, 147.

fatal ethical relativism from genuine moral pluralism, a prime criterion, I suggest, will be a moral tradition's ability to accord equal respect to all human beings and to treat them decently without humiliation.

III. THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

The socio-cultural complexity of bioethics is also characteristic of the Christian moral tradition and complicates cross-cultural discourse. I will briefly distinguish five aspects of such discourse.

1. Unity in Diversity

While Christianity has a clearly identifiable doctrinal core entailing moral standards for private and public life of its members, as a social institution it is neither in Chinese nor in Western societies a unified moral force, but speaks in many voices. For the purpose of our current topic we must differentiate between, on the one hand, Christianity as a roughly identifiable set of moral values that distinguishes it from other religions and that are largely shared by Christians and, on the other hand, the defined positions of individual churches and Christian communities on specific issue in bioethics. As any survey of these declarations and statements will confirm, they reflect the individual histories of faith, past and present, and frequently express different emphases and rankings of an otherwise shared set of Christian values. At the level below institutionalized Christianity, the range of ethical convictions among individual Christians may stretch from vigorous (sometimes even violent) opposition to both process and outcomes of public bioethical discourse on the basis of a fundamentalist reading of the Biblical teachings all the way to positions whose Christian affiliation is no longer evident.

2. Christianity and Secular Morality

The influence of Christianity on moral issues extends beyond its institutionalized forms and the ranks of avowed Christians, as the migration of Christian values into secular moral spaces suggests for Western thought and European culture. Correcting a still wide-spread prejudice

about the modern emancipation of ethics, Jürgen Habermas recently recalled the specific Christian genealogy of some fundamental notions of secular morality:

> For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or a catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love.[30]

I am inclined to find the most significant influence of Christianity both on modern ethics in general and on bioethics in particular in this perspective. Christian moral values can be compared with the leaven that—according to the Bible—leavens the whole lump (cf. Matthew 13:33; 1 Corinthians 5:6) without discernible traces. In this sense, Christianity is an integral component of Western moral identity and of potential interest to non-Western cultural and moral traditions.

The dialectic of secularization not only absorbed originally Christian values into the domain of public reason but also exposed the latter's precarious position. From the perspective of Christianity as the dominant value system in Europe for more than a thousand years, the emancipation of modern ethics turned out to be rather ambiguous: what was praised as the victory of reason and its liberation from the fetters of religion unfolded its own dialectic and raised grave doubts about reason's capability to provide ethics its own independent and unshakable foundation for its claim of universal validity of its principles and values. What Descartes thought was only a "morale par provision" (*Discours* III) has since become its trade mark and a permanent feature.

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[30] Jürgen Habermas, *Time of Transitions* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 150–151. See also Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 15:

> I do not believe that we, Europeans, can seriously understand concepts like morality and ethical life, person individuality, or freedom and emancipation, without appropriating the substance of the Judeo-Christian understanding of history in terms of salvation. And these concepts are, perhaps, nearer to our hearts than the conceptual resources of Platonic thought, centring on order and revolving around the cathartic intuition of ideas.

3. Chinese Christianity

At the empirical level, talk about the perspectives of Christianity for bioethics in China must be mindful of the historical complexity of the encounter between Christianity and Chinese culture and the fragmentation of Chinese Christianity. Moral positions no longer run exclusively along traditional denominational fault lines but differ even within one and the same Christian church or congregation. In addition, Christianity mirrors the diversity of Chinese society and the pluralism of its values, both moral and religious. In spite of the universality implicit in the Christian religion, Chinese Christianity displays, as Richard Madsen has pointed out, "the hues of all the different parts of the Chinese cultural landscape."[31] The fragmentation of Christianity in China is further complicated by the continued efforts on part of the government to exploit it for its purposes of religious control in the service of social stability. As Christian life in China is almost exclusively restricted to the private sphere and Chinese churches, unlike their counterparts in Hong Kong,[32] it cannot take positions on bioethical issues through public consultations, and any influence of Christian moral teachings on the regulation of such issues will only be indirect.

4. Moral Disorientation

Many observers have noted a widespread moral disorientation as one of the reasons for the increasing interest of many Chinese, including intellectuals, in religion. Apparently, the erosion of socialist ideology and traditional values as well as the effects of modernization, the market economy, and capitalism have caused a spiritual and moral vacuum that even the government acknowledged when it launched its campaign to build a so-called spiritual civilization (*jingshen wenming* 精神文明) in order to stem the tide that elevated "Mammonism" to the "virtual state creed" as Hong Kong commentator Willy Wo-lap Lam 林和立

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[31] Richard Madsen, "Chinese Christianity," in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict, and Resistance*, eds. Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 271–288, 284.

[32] See for example *The Hong Kong Government's Report of the Provisional Council on Reproductive Technology*, August 2000.

observed.[33] The crisis has also affected healthcare and weakened the traditional ethos of medicine as the art of humaneness. In her overview of Chinese bioethics, Cong Yali 叢亞麗 complained that "currently, China is undergoing the darkest period of the doctor-patient relationship in its history" characterized by patients' loss of trust in physicians and hospitals.[34] Newspaper reports abound about hospitals turning away impoverished patients, or grossly overcharging ("Harbin scandal"), doctors refusing to operate without prior payment, and frustrated patients assaulting health care personnel.[35] That the moral crisis is not restricted to healthcare is illustrated in a widely publicized report from Guizhou 貴州 about a six-year-old boy falling into a river and drowning because bystanders would not save him without prior payment.[36] The moral distance that separates those bystanders from Mencius who famously used a very similar example to argue for compassionate nature as the fertile soil from which the sprouts of morality would grow has troubled many. Appeals to "social ethics" as the supposed core of Chinese modernization and to integrating the ethos of humanity with "science and technology, economics, politics" into a humanistic culture seem to lack sufficient motivational force.[37]

While similar things could be said about the West, in the traditionally rather homogeneous society of China its implications for social cohesion and political stability are more severe. It may therefore not be too far-fetched to assume that the moral crisis may make concerned

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[33] Willy Wo-lap Lam, "Keeping Western Influence at Bay," *South China Morning Post*, October 2, 1996. See also Zhang Rulun, "The Conditions and Possibilities of a Dialogue between China and the West on Ethics," in Pohl and Müller, *Chinese Ethics in a Global Context*, 19–37, 22:

> It cannot be denied that we are facing a moral vacuum. This is a real crisis we must deal with. Without a moral basis, China cannot be a sound society […] it is not a matter of returning to tradition, but a matter of establishing a new one. That means we must find moral strength not only in our tradition, but also elsewhere. It is quite evident that a dialogue with the West on ethics will benefit us greatly.

[34] Cong, "Bioethics in China," in Peppin and Cherry, *Regional Perspectives in Bioethics*, 249.

[35] Edwin Hui, "The Contemporary Healthcare Crisis in China and the Role of Medical Professionalism," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 35 (2010): 477–492.

[36] Lam, "Keeping Western Influence at Bay."

[37] Yao Jiehou, "Social Ethics and Chinese Modernization," in Pohl and Müller, *Chinese Ethics in a Global Context*, 106–118, 109.

Chinese more receptive for alternative moral traditions and even for Christian values.[38]

While the number of Christians among Chinese intellectuals may be marginal, the fact that Christianity has caught their attention is significant. Often "standing outside any of the Chinese Churches and denying any personal faith-involvement with Christianity," their research and publications reveal "a change in attitude towards Christianity, from one of skepticism and outright hostility to a new one which is more positive" with the "emphasis on an encounter with Christianity in historical, philosophical, sociological and cultural terms."[39] According to Zhuo Xinping 卓新平, Director of the World Religion Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the main reasons for this development are directly related to the search for spiritual and moral resources for the construction of the new China.[40] The interest in Christianity therefore must be seen in the wider context of a re-evaluation of Western thought and culture and of the role Christianity played in it.[41] If it is true that Christian values that once were at the heart of Western culture extend their influence even to secular society, Chinese intellectuals may think it worthwhile to explore their possible function for the reconstruction of Chinese culture.

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[38] Richard Madsen, *China's Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 8–9:

> The crisis of meaning in contemporary China bears the marks of that society's particular, traumatic twentieth-century history […] Under these circumstances, many people in China are earnestly searching for meaning and are renewing their affiliation with communities that carry such meaning.

[39] Alan Miller, "Sympathetic But Not Christians," in *Handbook of Christianity in China*, vol. 2, *1800 to the Present*, ed. R. G. Tiedemann (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 837–847, 837.

[40] Zhuo Xinping, "Die Bedeutung des Christentums für Chinas Modernisierung" [The Importance of Christianity for China's Modernization], in *Christentum im Reich der Mitte* [Christianity in China], ed. Monika Gänßbauer (Hamburg: EMW,1998), 78–86; Zhuo Xinping, "The role of Christianity in the Construction of a Harmonious Society Today," in *Pilgrims and Citizens: Christian Social Engagement in East Asia Today*, ed. Michael Nei-chiu Poon (Hindmarsh, SA: ATF, 2006),197–200.

[41] Zhuo Xinping, "Discussion on 'Cultural Christians' in China," in *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future*, eds. Stephen Uhalley Jr. and Wu Xiaoxin (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), 283–300.

5. Religious Concepts and the Language of Public Reason

In responding to the fundamental challenges of modern genetics and biotechnology Christianity can and should offer its moral resources for a broad cross-cultural bioethics discourse that re-assesses its own ethical basis and outlines normative parameters for defining human destiny. For Habermas, this is a call for philosophy to assume the role as translator of fundamental religious insights into the language of public reason and thus to make them available for a moral discourse accessible to all.[42] In this approach, I note similarities with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's suggestion for a "non-religious interpretation of Biblical concepts," jotted down in the face of death in a letter from prison on July 16, 1944.[43] This idea galvanized a whole generation of Christians into political theology, social work, and the transformation of unjust institutions. A successful translation of Christian moral concepts and norms may be a source of inspiration for China as well, particularly when existing moral frameworks will prove insufficient to tackle the bioethical challenges raised by advances in biotechnology.[44]

IV. CHRISTIAN THEMES FOR BIOETHICS IN A CHINESE CONTEXT

1. Human Dignity

The most prominent candidate for a Christian conception that is a significant resource for the re-assessment of the foundations of (bio)ethics is the idea of human dignity. Although as a principle of morality it is rooted in the Christian theology of creation and in Christology, it has not only conceptual equivalents in the Chinese

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[42] Jürgen Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion* [Between Naturalism and Religion] (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005), 249.

[43] Eberhard Bethge, ed., *Widerstand und Ergebung* [Resistance and Surrender] (München: Siebenstern, 1968), 175.

[44] Nie and Campbell, "Multiculturalism and Asian Bioethics," 165.

moral tradition, but was also constitutive for the construction of modern moral identity and the conception of human rights.[45]

Theologically, human dignity signifies an ontological quality of human beings that makes them morally considerable. As children of God created in His image all human beings are of intrinsic worth and therefore owe respect to each other. The full moral implications of God's creative act were first unfolded in thirteenth-century Christology's onto-theological conception of personhood. Whereas according to the neo-platonic tradition dignity was a general predicate of all being, it was now reserved for the human person as the individual whose specific mode of existence is moral (*esse morale*) and thus distinct from the natural or rational modes of other beings. Its intrinsic worth is Christologically grounded in the "infinite dignity" of the humanity of Christ that alone can confer infinite value in a finite world.[46] This idea of human dignity precludes from the outset any reductionist definition of personhood prevalent in contemporary bioethics in terms of cognitive qualities. It is after all a metaphysical, not an empirical basis that constitutes the moral principle of human dignity and equal respect for all human beings.[47]

The modern origin of the ethics of dignity and respect lies in Kant's moral philosophy. Kant was aware not only of the Christian genealogy but also of its amalgamation with common morality that was Christian in nature as it had integrated fundamental conceptions of the Judaic-Christian tradition. In this sense, Kant's moral philosophy is both the reconstruction of common morality and the successful translation of a fundamental Christian concept into the language of public reason. As Alan Donagan observed, "morality, as Kant presents it, is traditional Christian morality demystified and universalized. It does not presuppose the truth of the Christian faith, but is presupposed by it."[48] This morality is based on one fundamental principle, the

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[45] Gerhold K. Becker, "In Search of Humanity: Human Dignity as a Basic Moral Attitude," in *The Future of Value Inquiry*, eds. Matti Häyry and Tuija Takala (Atlanta: Rodopi, 2001), 53–65.

[46] Theo Kobusch has argued that this Christological context that stands in the background of the modern conception of human dignity was revived in sixteenth-century theology. Theo Kobusch, *Die Entdeckung der Person* [The Discovery of the Person] (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997).

[47] Bernard Williams, "The Idea of Equality," in *Moral Concepts*, ed. Joel Feinberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 158.

[48] Alan Donagan, "Common Morality and Kant's Enlightenment Project," in *Prospects For a Common Morality*, eds. Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 53–72, 54.

principle that obligates everyone to treat humanity always as an end and never as a means only. Its popular precursor is the *Golden Rule* of the gospel (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31) and its philosophical expression the categorical imperative. In short, the principle of human dignity encapsulates an understanding of human beings as qualitatively different from anything else, since their worth is without equivalent and therefore "beyond price." The dignity of such beings commands unconditional respect (*Achtung*).

Human dignity draws its moral force from a particular vision of humanity that insists on the priority of reciprocal respect over humiliation, force, and violence. What we owe to each other is grounded in what we fundamentally are: fragile and vulnerable beings with human face. As Emanuel Levinas has reminded us, by looking at the naked face of the other (*autrui*) we enter into moral space. In such an encounter, the other is exposed to me in the irreducible existence of his or her defenseless eyes. Although the other as corporeal reality is an object among objects, the open face looking at me signals a fundamental difference to all objects as it puts up an invisible moral barrier against intrusion. It opens a relation "with something absolutely other: the resistance of what has no resistance—the ethical resistance."[49] It is this moral barrier that is central to the idea of human dignity and defines a person's moral standing. Human dignity is both empowerment and constraint[50] and it would be misconstrued if it were conceptualized exclusively as a principle to safeguard individual rights but not also as the principle of responsibility and respect for all other human beings.

As humanity is increasingly entrusted into our own hands, it is of utmost importance to critically reconstruct the normative idea of human dignity in a comprehensive intercultural ethical discourse. In a globalized world, the fundamental ethical questions are also global and can be tackled with a chance of success only in an unbiased, critical, and cross-cultural dialogue that engages all relevant moral resources. It is therefore most promising that equivalents of human dignity can be found in ancient Confucianism and its account of human nature. As Irene Bloom (among others) has noted, "both Confucius and Mencius display a deep concern for what, through modern eyes, can be recog-

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[49] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985).

[50] Deryck Beyleveld and Roger Brownsword, *Human Dignity in Bioethics and Biolaw* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

nized as 'human dignity.'"[51] It is particularly noteworthy that the Mencian idea of a moral disposition of human nature (*xing* 性) that is an inherent and distinctive quality of the human species simply by virtue of being human and not as a result of individual accomplishments has even religious roots.[52] The natural equality of humans "exists in spite of social hierarchy, and even in spite of any distinction between the 'civilized' and the 'barbarians.'"[53]

The *locus classicus* of an equivalent for the idea of human dignity is *Mencius* 6A17, which (in Dobson's translation) states that "each man individually has nobility within himself. He does not think about it, that is all."[54] Legge reads: "all men have within themselves that which is truly honourable. Only they do not think of it."[55] This nobility of human beings that gives them intrinsic worth is constituted in their moral nature with which they have been endowed by Heaven and from which the four sprouts of compassion, shame, modesty as well as a sense of right and wrong grow, when appropriately cultivated, into humaneness, justice, propriety, and moral knowledge. This moral nature in terms of moral predispositions or "certain unlearned responses" is the common endowment of all human beings as a species-typical quality that distinguishes them from non-human animals.[56] It follows that someone who lacked them would not be human (*Mencius* 2A6). As moral capacities they are tender seedlings that can be overlooked, but, as Mencius points out: "They are in me originally. Only this has never dawned on me" (*Mencius* 6A6).[57] Mencius clearly distinguishes this ontological sense of dignity as inherent in all human beings from a social sense as

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[51] Irene Bloom, "Mencius and Human Rights," in *Confucianism and Human Rights*, eds. Wm. Theodore DeBary and Tu Weiming (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 94–116, 105.

[52] Heiner Roetz, "'The Dignity Within Oneself': Chinese Tradition and Human Rights," in *Chinese Thought in a Global Context: A Dialogue Between Chinese and Western Philosophical Approaches*, ed. Karl-Heinz Pohl (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 236–261, 247.

[53] Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1977), 72. Confucius, *Analects* 12, 5: "Everyone in the world is their [i.e. exemplary persons' *junzi* 君子] brother," Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., trans., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 154.

[54] W. A. C. H. Dobson, *Mencius* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 182.

[55] James Legge, *The Works of Mencius: Confucian Classics*, vol. 2 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 419.

[56] Shun Kwong-loi, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 190.

[57] D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius*, vol. 2 (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1984), 229.

the result of individual conduct and societal recognition.[58] While the latter kind of dignity or nobility can be lost, the former cannot.[59]

I am aware that this interpretation of a common human nature is not unanimously endorsed, although it seems to have gained ground. Yet in our present context it is important to note that the Chinese tradition has sufficient moral resources to engage in a productive discourse both with Christian and modern secular ethics about the idea of human dignity and its significance for a re-assessment of human nature. I am neither suggesting an "essentialist" approach that would identify China or "the West" (Europe) with a quasi-invariable essence nor subscribing to Jacques Gernet's thesis of a fundamental incompatibility between Chinese culture and Christianity.[60] Drawing on Nicolas Standaert's "method of differentiation" and the "paradigm of interaction," I am searching for commonalities any meaningful cross-cultural discourse seems to presuppose.[61] Although the starting positions and the justificatory frameworks would certainly be different, they may nevertheless point to a conception of humanity that can be shared. Rawls' idea of an overlapping consensus may point to the heuristic model for such a result.

Reference to human dignity has already its place in various contemporary Chinese legal and regulatory instruments ranging from the *Ethical Standards for Medical Personnel and Its Implementation* to the Chinese Constitution of 1982.[62] Besides the socialist principle of medical ethics that requires of medical personnel to heal the wounded, rescue the dying, and practice "revolutionary humanitarianism," the *Ethical Standards* adopted in 1988 by the Chinese Ministry of Health as the

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[58] *Mencius* 6A17: "The honour [nobility] that derives from men is not the good honour" (*lianggui* 良貴).

[59] Similarly, Julia Po-wah Tao Lai argues that:

> [The] term "dignity" in the Confucian moral tradition is used in not just one, but two senses: firstly, "dignity" as inherent and something we recognize as definitional of being "human"; and, secondly, "dignity" as earned and something we cultivate as a virtue, a distinct human good. The first sense of "dignity" is grounded in one's intrinsic natural nobility, which is from within oneself.

Julia Po-wah Tao Lai, "Dignity in Long-Term Care for Older Persons: A Confucian Perspective," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 32 (2007): 465–481, 469.

[60] Jacques Gernet, *Chine et Christianisme* [China and Christianity] (Paris: Gallimard, 1982).

[61] Nicolas Standaert, "Christianity in Late Ming and Early Qing as a Case of Cultural Transmission," in Uhalley and Wu, *China and Christianity*, 81–115.

[62] Roetz, "The Dignity within Oneself," 250.

first professional code in China list the commitment to respecting patients' dignity and rights.[63] In Hong Kong, the Social Welfare Department Report on Services for the Elderly of 2002 refers to human dignity as a moral benchmark in healthcare.[64] In comments on the 2005 UN Declaration on Human Cloning, the Chinese delegate explicitly mentioned human dignity twice and pointed out that his government would continue to oppose reproductive cloning and carry out strict control of therapeutic cloning, so that the ethics of life and human dignity were not violated.[65] China voted also in favor of an amendment stating that practices which are contrary to human dignity, such as the reproductive cloning of human beings, shall not be permitted. Similarly, Confucian bioethicists have drawn on the Mencian account of human nature in their construction of an argument against human reproductive cloning as a violation of human dignity[66] and of the "sanctity" of the human being.[67]

I conclude that the relative ease with which official Chinese documents and bioethicists draw on the idea of human dignity is encouraging for a Sino-Christian discourse on the foundations of bioethics and the ethical implications of genetic intervention that may alter human nature.

2. The Moral Status of Human Beings

Characteristic of the dominant perception of the moral status of humans in contemporary bioethics is a sharp distinction between the person and the individual human being. Its far-reaching implications are most obvious in the ethical issues at the beginning and at the end of life, ranging from embryonic stem cell research and abortion to euthanasia.

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[63] Zhang and Cheng, "Medicine is a Humane Art," S12.

[64] Tao Lai, "Dignity in Long-Term Care for Older Persons," 465.

[65] Fifty-ninth General Assembly of the United Nations' Sixth Committee, Declaration on Human Cloning, 18 February 2005, http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2005/gal3271.doc.htm.

[66] Fan Ruiping, "Human Cloning and Human Dignity: Pluralist Society and the Confucian Moral Community," *Chinese & International Philosophy of Medicine* 1, no. 3 (1998): 73–93, 193–196; Gerhold K. Becker, "Bioethics with Chinese Characteristics: The Development of Bioethics in Hong Kong," in Peppin and Cherry, *Regional Perspectives in Bioethics*, 261–284.

[67] Julia Po-wah Tao Lai, "Confucianism," in *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, vol. 1, ed. Ruth Chadwick (San Diego: Academic, 1998), 597–608, 606.

Insofar as moral status is only attributed to the person on the basis of certain cognitive functions, human biological nature and the human body are increasingly morally redundant and variables of better alternatives.

This has two major consequences. Firstly, as moral status is no longer accorded to humans simply by virtue of their human nature (genome), some will fall below the moral threshold either because they have not yet qualified for personhood or never will, or they have lost it permanently and now are only in the status of "former" or "social persons." In all cases, the care and protection they are entitled to are functions of their moral status and weighed as factors among others in the normative balance of goods.

Secondly, personhood and thus moral status are no longer the exclusive privilege of human beings but will have to be accorded to non-human animals and any other beings, natural or artificial, that may qualify. The traditional focus of ethics on human beings is denounced as *speciesism* and morally ranked on par with racism. By implication, the United Nations' Declaration on Human Rights would have to be revised into a Charter of personal rights.

From a Christian perspective, the sharp distinction between being a person and being human is counter-intuitive and falls short of the experience of human agency. The Christian tradition sees the difference between humans and the rest of creation in humanity's being created in God's own image and likeness (Genesis 1:26–27). Christianity thus affirms a holistic understanding of the person that is irreducible to cognitive characteristics that only contingently apply to human embodiment. As already mentioned, in its explication of the personhood of Christ, medieval Christology developed a new philosophy of the human person that was no longer based on the traditional Aristotelian ontology of substance and specific empirical capacities but on a metaphysical concept of human moral nature. What makes human beings different and worthy of respect is that they are beings of freedom: they are called to freely choose the good and the just. As genuinely moral beings their freedom is not simply an empirical characteristic among others, but their specific form of existence. As empirical beings, they share their animal nature with all other creatures and are like them subjected to the constraints of nature. Yet there is—in the words of Meister Eckhart (1260–1372)—a divine spark in them (soul) that testifies to their divine nature and resists naturalistic or materialistic reduction. That makes them peculiar beings of two worlds, the world of nature and the world of spirit and mind. In the words of the *Catechism of*

the Catholic Church, "the human person, made in the image of God, is a being at once corporeal and spiritual" (no. 362). Personhood is neither something they are accorded by others and that they can subsequently lose, nor can it be dualistically separated from its embodiment. Instead it is what designates the specific form in which only humans exist as biological beings. A mentality that "recognizes as a subject of rights only the person who enjoys full or at least incipient autonomy and who emerges from a state of total dependence on others" would, as Pope John Paul II writes in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae,* ultimately be unable to establish a culture of life and instead promote a "culture of death."

It is obvious that the Christian ethics of human dignity and personhood represents the unique experience of Biblical faith and the specific Christian world-view. As such it is not available in secular ethics and may even be incompatible with the conceptual framework of liberal bioethics. As a religious truth, its influence will be largely confined to the ethics of Christian communities; as a moral vision, however, it can challenge our common ethical assumptions and encourage the reassessment of the dominant bioethical narrative.

It can also stimulate a cross-cultural debate with the Chinese conception of relational personhood that has gained prominence in contemporary Chinese bioethics as an alternative to the alleged Western individualism. This debate will, hopefully, work in both directions by discovering similarities and clarifying ambiguities or inconsistencies in the light of the other tradition, and thus making a joint effort of moving the debate forward. Three issues could be put on the research agenda of such cross-cultural discourse.

Firstly, as both traditions reject the myopic view of the person in contemporary bioethics and its dichotomy between morally relevant cognitive functions and non-moral forms of bodily existence, they need to show how they account for the *prima facie* evidence for a gradualist interpretation of personhood and its moral relevance for person status entailing rights and responsibilities. The Chinese idea of relational personhood that emphasizes the importance of socialization and interpersonal recognition for moral status challenges the ontological personhood of the Christian tradition while leaving room for the moral recognition of prenatal human life. The view that—according to a famous statement of Xunzi 荀子—human life begins at birth and ends in death (*Xunzi* 19), which is frequently taken to summarize the Chinese position, does not necessarily preclude moral status of prenatal life. Nie

Jingbao 聶精保 has argued that from a Confucian view late abortion would be:

> considered killing a human being and hence, a form of manslaughter. Based on traditional medical literature, there is no doubt that the fetus at the late, if not early, stage of pregnancy has already been a member of the family, the patrilineage, the country, and the human community, with a physical and spiritual connection to heaven, earth, and ancestors.[68]

Secondly, in its strong version according to which the human being is nothing but the totality of roles or merely the "ever changing matrix of relationships through which, over a lifetime, one defines one's nature,"[69] the idea of relational personhood is a variant of the thesis that Chinese thought did not develop a general conception of humans as moral beings. The idea of human dignity and its implications for moral personhood and autonomy could redirect the search in the Chinese classical tradition for factual evidence for the assessment of this thesis. From such a "Christian-inspired" perspective Confucian ethics may turn out not ultimately to reject a conception of the person as a responsible self. While the Confucian person certainly derives meaning, recognition, and fulfillment from the proper performance of social roles, it is doubtful that it would be reducible to them. It cannot be ruled out that much of the confusion about the Confucian "self" may result from "mixing up individualism and autonomy." Confucians may not have aspired to be "individualists in the modern sense," yet they seem to have "insisted on the autonomy of their judgment" and taken moral responsibility for it.[70] As outlined in the previous section, at least the Mencian tradition knows of a genuine human condition that can be acted against, but not lost even when people see a man resemble "an animal" or behave like one (*Mencius* 6A8).

Thirdly, Edwin Hui has suggested that Chinese bioethics and Christianity may revisit their positions on personhood and complement possible ambiguities or shortcomings through their respective moral re-

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[68] Nie Jingbao, *Behind the Silence: Chinese Voices on Abortion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 214.

[69] Roger T. Ames, "Rites as Rights: The Confucian Alternative," in *Human Rights and the World's Religions*, ed. L. S. Rouner (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 199–216, 203.

[70] Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 150.

sources. In his reading, Christian trinitarian theology laid the foundations for a relational understanding of creation that could provide the basis for a meaningful discourse with the Chinese view of the person as a member of the Heaven-Earth-man triad that constitutes personhood in a complex ontology of relationships involving mutuality and commonality of self and other.[71]

3. Naturalistic Tendencies of Biomedicine and the Question of Meaning

Presumably the greatest challenge to medicine as the art of humaneness as well as to bioethics comes from modern biomedicine's underlying naturalism. Anthropologist Arthur Kleinmann sees one of the main features of biomedicine in its "extreme insistence on materialism as the grounds of knowledge" and a "powerful commitment to an idea of nature that excludes the teleological."[72]

The prevailing naturalistic worldview leaves space neither for ethics nor for religion or metaphysics, but regards the world as a closed system of which only the hard sciences can offer an adequate description that meets their methodological criteria of empirical objectivity. From this perspective, human beings are essentially biological systems of self-preservation whose differentiation from other such systems can be explained by the laws of evolution. In its most ambitious physicalist version, naturalism seeks to reduce all biological and mental phenomena to their material components and to offer a functional analysis of consciousness, mind, and self.

It is obvious that this worldview has serious consequences for our self-understanding as human beings since it devaluates fundamental intuitions of religion and ethics and with them our search for meaning and purpose. Although it draws on latest developments in a number of sciences, particularly genetics and the neurosciences, its history precedes the origins of modern science. In fact, it can be traced back to a peculiar ambiguity of the scientific paradigm itself as it first emerged in classical Greek philosophy. According to Plato's famous statement,

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[71] Edwin Hui, "Jen and Perichoresis: The Confucian and Christian Bases of the Relational Person," in *The Moral Status of Persons*, ed. Gerhold K. Becker (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 95–117.

[72] Arthur Kleinmann, *Writing At the Margin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 29.

philosophical inquiry originated in a sense of wonder. Wonderment is simultaneously the acknowledgment of ignorance and the awareness of the mystery of being that no explanation can ever exhaust. Typologically, the classical attitudes towards the existential experience of wonder are exemplified in Plato and Aristotle: while the latter takes it as the starting point for scientific curiosity that aims at finally substituting knowledge for ignorance, for the former it marks the ultimate limit of any rational inquiry beyond which it can only speculate in images and myths. The alternative is not between the rational and the irrational, but between respecting the finitude of human nature and the limits of reason and—with Protagoras—regarding man as the measure of all things. Ultimately, it raises the question of how we want to understand ourselves and from where we draw meaning.

If philosophy can show—as Kant has argued—that naturalism as a comprehensive theory is self-defeating as it is not possible to "form a coherent account of a spatio-temporal totality that is causally ordered,"[73] the question about the meaning of life is not a scientific question and, by implication, questions of the mind cannot be reduced to those of the brain. The world is deeper than the proponents of naturalism are ready to admit. Wittgenstein has reminded us that even if in our pursuit for knowledge all possible scientific questions could one day be answered, "our life problems would not yet have been touched."[74] For Kant a totality of knowledge and a world fully explained scientifically is only a regulative idea.

Questions about meaning and purpose arise particularly and most disturbingly when we are confronted with disease, suffering, and death. Yet neither biomedicine nor contemporary bioethics seem to know how to address them. For the former, disease is mainly a cluster of physiological phenomena for medical assessment, explanation, and alleviation or cure;[75] for the latter, the question of meaning simply falls outside its scope. The naturalistic tendency of biomedicine to disconnect the body from the person systematically ignores all larger metaphysical questions. It fosters the illusion of reality as almost infinitely perfectible,

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[73] Onora O'Neill, "Reason and Autonomy in Grundlegung III," in *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* [Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals], ed. Otfried Höffe (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2000), 282–298, 294.

[74] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* [The Logical-Philosophical Treatise] (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966), 6.52.

[75] Tristram H. Engelhardt, Jr., *The Foundations of Bioethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 189.

with science setting the criteria. Intimating that "pain is controllable, suffering escapable, and death ever more postponable,"[76] biomedicine invites us to measure our natural condition against the demands of shifting standards of individual performance and longevity. Soon we may no longer be satisfied with merely repairing failing organs and remedy for bodily defects but claim a right for a "better" body with greatly enhanced capacities.[77]

The naturalistic paradigm of biomedicine stands in tension with the holistic perspectives of Christianity and the Chinese ethical and medical traditions. Characteristic for both is a perception that modern medical diagnosis does not reveal the true root-causes but only scratches the surface of disease by merely pointing at different sets of symptoms, since its main focus is on humans as biological systems. As long as the dominant medical methodologies are incapable of accounting for the intersections between the biological and spiritual, its diagnostics will be incomplete and its therapeutic efforts only partially effective.

Christianity and traditional Chinese medicine place questions of disease, suffering, and mortality within comprehensive narratives that open a spiritual dimension to human existence that neither science nor biomedicine can accommodate. The fundamental presupposition of traditional Chinese medicine that body, soul, and spirit form an integrated whole[78] has some parallel in a philosophical anthropology still rooted in the Christian view of the body. The fact that we do not simply "have" a body but "are" our body signals a rather intimate and holistic relationship between intelligible self and biological body, between the person and her (one's) embodiment. Insofar as the self requires embodiment for its presence in the world of extension, the human body is both medium and representation of the self, is body as object (*Körper*) that can be subjected to genetic (or surgical) intervention, and body as subject (*Leib*) that signifies the person's dignity and biographical authenticity.[79]

For Christianity, the meaning of life transcends bodily existence, but is inseparable from it. For embodied beings of freedom, the drama of

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[76] Engelhardt, *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*, 310.

[77] Linda F. Hogle, "Enhancement Technologies and the Body," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34 (2005): 695–714.

[78] Kerry W. Bowman and Edwin Hui, "Bioethics for Clinicians: 20. Chinese Bioethics," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 163, no. 11 (2000): 1481–1485, 1482.

[79] Bernhard Waldenfels, *Das leibliche Selbst* [The Physical Self] (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000).

human frailty and finitude is as much the drama of the human body as it is the drama of the spirit. Accordingly, disease, suffering, and mortality are equally "natural," with causes that can and should be investigated by science and medicine as they are "supernatural" and interwoven with the history of sin, forgiveness, and salvation.[80] While suffering remains, its meaning is transformed, and seemingly senseless death is integrated into the experience of faith that culminates in love of God and other. To God they entrust their lives with all its joy and pain, for the needy and suffering they care through works of charity.

It is obvious that this interpretation of human finitude is not available outside Christian faith. Yet the question is whether it offers a view on humanity that secular bioethics needs to consider, even though it stands on different ground. It is remarkable indeed that, from a Chinese perspective, Zhuo Xinping has recently answered this question in the positive. He has argued that core teachings of Christianity such as sin, salvation, transcendence, and eschatology are of particular interest to the Chinese. They offer a contrasting vision of human life that can complement the traditionally more optimistic Chinese characterization of its tradition as a "culture of joy" that tends to ignore the "darker side" in human nature. They also resonate with the current experience of "moral bankruptcy, human corruptibility and pessimism about life" that in Zhuo's reading makes Chinese more receptive for the Christian message of sin and salvation.[81]

Similar observations have been reported from the secular "West." The re-emergence of religion at a time of moral disorientation and crisis may therefore offer the chance for the re-evaluation of its resources for a more adequate picture of ourselves. It seems, however, that the likelihood of such re-evaluation will increase when, firstly, a translation of religious insights into the public language of reason, to which I referred above, is possible, and, secondly, when people have become sensitive to the shortcomings of modernity and aware that something is amiss that previous generations found in their comprehensive doctrines and the meaning they were able to generate. Habermas has argued that this is indeed the case and that the tendency of the language of secular ethics to merely ignore substantive religious meaning causes irrita-

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[80] Michael Sievernich, "The Significance of the Concept of Sin for Bioethics," *Christian Bioethics* 11, no. 2 (2005): 189–199.

[81] Zhuo Xinping, "Original Sin in the East-West Dialogue: A Chinese View," *Studies in World Christianity* 1, no. 1 (1995): 80–86, 82.

tions.[82] He believes that when sin was transformed into guilt, something was lost whose empty space cannot be filled by substitutes. The recognition of sin implies a longing for forgiveness that is accompanied by the unsentimental wish that suffering caused to others may be made undone. No form of secular remembrance of the victims can substitute for the religious hope that past suffering of the just was not in vain. Yet in a post-metaphysical age, even the lost hope in salvation and resurrection leaves a tangible emptiness, when secular modernity is confronted with the irreversibility of past suffering and with the injustice of abusing, denigrating, and murdering the innocent. As the magnitude of such suffering exceeds any secular, humanly possible forms of restitution and compensation, it raises questions about modern morality's own foundations and about the significance of the spiritual dimension of human existence for ethics.

I should think that this is a major topic for a cross-cultural bioethics discourse on the future of humanity when "we do not know whether the new genetics will enhance the autonomy of subject, or whether the enhancement of humans will alter irreversibly our self-understanding as moral persons."[83]

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[82] Jürgen Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen: Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001).

[83] Mendieta, "Habermas on Human Cloning," 728.