



Are There Postmetaphysical Answers to the Question: What is the “Good Life”?

In the novel *Stiller* Max Frisch has Stiller, the public prosecutor, ask: “What does a human being do with the time he has to live? I was hardly fully aware of the question; it was simply an irritation.” Frisch poses the question in the indicative mood. In their self-concern, reflective readers give the question an ethical turn: “What should I do with the time I have to live?” For long enough philosophers believed that they could give suitable advice in reply. But today, in our postmetaphysical age, philosophy no longer pretends to have answers to questions regarding the personal, or even the collective, conduct of life. Theodor Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* begins with a melancholy refrain of Nietzsche’s “joyful science” – by admitting this inability: “The melancholy science from which I make this offering to my friend relates to a region that from time immemorial was regarded as the true field of philosophy . . . : the teaching of the good life.”¹ But ethics has now regressed, as Adorno believed, and become the “melancholy science,” because it allows, at best, only scattered, aphoristic “reflections from damaged life.”



As long as philosophers still had faith that they were able

to assure themselves about their ability to discuss the whole of nature and history, they had authority over the supposedly established frameworks into which the human life of individuals and communities had to fit. The order of the cosmos and human nature, the stages of secular and sacred history provided normatively laden facts that, so it seemed, could also disclose the right way to live. Here "right" had the exemplary sense of an imitation-worthy model for living, both for the life of the individual and for the political community. Just as the great religions present their founders' way of life as the path to salvation, so also metaphysics offered its models of life – for the select few, of course, who did not follow the crowd. The doctrines of the good life and of a just society – ethics and politics – made up a harmonious whole. But with the acceleration of social change, the lifespans of these models of the good life have become increasingly shorter – whether they were aimed at the Greek polis, the estates of the medieval *societas civilis*, the well-rounded individual of the urban Renaissance or, as with Hegel, at the system of family, civil society, and constitutional monarchy.

Rawls's political liberalism marks the endpoint of this development, precisely as a response to the pluralism of worldviews and to the spreading individualization of lifestyles. Surveying the rubble of philosophical attempts to designate *particular* ways of life as exemplary or universally obligatory, Rawls draws the proper conclusion: that the "just society" ought to leave it to individuals to choose how it is that they want to "spend the time they have for living." It guarantees to each an equal freedom to develop an ethical self-understanding, so as to realize a personal conception of the "good life" according to one's own abilities and choices.

It is certainly true that individual life-projects do not emerge independently of intersubjectively shared life contexts. However, in complex societies one culture can assert itself against other cultures only by convincing its succeeding generations – who can also say no – of the advan-

tages of its world-disclosive semantic and action-orienting power. "Nature reserves" for cultures are neither possible nor desirable. In a constitutional democracy the majority may also not prescribe for minorities aspects of its own cultural form of life (beyond the common political culture of the country) by claiming for its culture an authoritative guiding function (as "*Leitkultur*").

As the foregoing remarks indicate, practical philosophy by no means renounces all of its normative concerns. At the same time, it does restrict itself, by and large, to questions of justice. In particular, its aim is to clarify the moral point of view from which we judge norms and actions whenever we must determine what lies in the equal interest of everyone and what is equally good for all. At first glance, moral theory and ethics appear to be oriented to the same question: What ought I, or what ought we, to do? But the "ought" has a different sense once we are no longer asking about rights and duties that everyone ascribes to one another from an inclusive we-perspective, but instead are concerned with our own life from the first-person perspective and ask what is best "for me" or "for us" in the long run and all things considered. Such ethical questions regarding our own weal and woe arise in the context of a *particular* life history or a *unique* form of life. They are wedded to questions of identity: how we should understand ourselves, who we are and want to be. Obviously there is no answer to such questions that would be independent of the given context and thus would bind all persons in the same way.

Consequently, theories of justice and morality take their own separate path today, at least a path different from that of "ethics," if we understand this in the classical sense of a doctrine of the right way to live. The moral point of view obliges us to abstract from those exemplary pictures of a successful or undamaged life that have been handed on in the grand narratives of metaphysics and religion. Our existential self-understanding can still continue to draw its nourishment from the substance of these traditions just as

it always did, but philosophy no longer has the right to intervene in this struggle of gods and demons. Precisely with regard to the questions that have the greatest relevance for us, philosophy retires to a metalevel and investigates only the formal properties of processes of self-understanding, without taking a position on the contents themselves. That may be unsatisfying, but who can object to such a well-justified reluctance?

To be sure, moral theory pays a high price for its division of labor with an ethics that specializes in the forms of existential self-understanding: it thereby dissolves the context that first linked moral judgments with the motivation toward right action. Moral insights effectively bind the will only when they are embedded in an ethical self-understanding that joins the concern about one's own well-being with the interest in justice. Deontological theories after Kant may be very good at explaining how to ground and apply moral norms; but they still are unable to answer the question of why we should be moral *at all*. Political theories are likewise unable to answer the question of why the citizens of a democratic polity, when they disagree about the principles of their living together, should orient themselves toward the common good – and not rather satisfy themselves with a strategically negotiated *modus vivendi*. Theories of justice that have been uncoupled from ethics can only *hope* that processes of socialization and political forms of life meet them halfway.²

Even more disquieting is a further question: Why should philosophical ethics give way to psychotherapies that have few qualms about taking on the classical task of providing an orientation for living by eliminating psychic disturbances? The philosophical core of psychoanalysis clearly emerges when, for example, Alexander Mitscherlich understands psychological illness as the impairment of a specifically human mode of existence. Such illness signifies a self-inflicted loss of freedom, because the patient is simply compensating for an unconscious suffering with

his symptoms – a suffering he escapes by self-deception. The goal of therapy is a self-knowledge that “is often nothing more than the transformation of illness into suffering, albeit a suffering that raises *Homo sapiens* to a higher level because it does not negate his freedom.”³

Such a concept of psychological “illness” stems from an analogy with somatic illness. But how far does this analogy go, given that the area of psychology largely lacks observable and clearly ascertainable parameters for health? Evidently a normative understanding of an “undisturbed self-existence” must fill in for the missing somatic indicators. This is especially clear in those cases where the pressure of suffering that drives the patient to the analyst is itself repressed, so that the disturbance inconspicuously fits into a normal life. Why should philosophy shrink back from matters that psychoanalysis, for example, believes it can deal with? This issue concerns the clarification of our intuitive understanding of the clinical aspects of an unsuccessful or not-unsuccessful life. Moreover, the text quoted above from Mitscherlich betrays his debt to the existential philosophy of authors like Kierkegaard and his successors. This is no accident.

II

Kierkegaard was the first philosopher who answered the basic ethical question regarding the success or failure of one’s own life with a postmetaphysical concept of “being-able-to-be-oneself.” Kierkegaard’s philosophical descendants – Heidegger, Jaspers, and Sartre – found such a radical Protestant’s obsession with a merciful God a bit much. In his engagement with Hegel’s speculative thought, Kierkegaard answered the question of the right way to live with an answer that was indeed *post-metaphysical*, while at the same time *theological*. But the existentialist philosophers who were committed to a methodological atheism recognized Kierkegaard as the

thinker who revived the ethical question in the most innovative manner and provided an answer that was not only substantive but also sufficiently formal – sufficiently formal, that is, in view of a legitimate pluralism of world-views that prohibits any form of paternalism in the area of genuinely ethical advice. The Kierkegaard of *Either/Or*, with his concept of the "ethical stage" of existence, offered the natural point of connection.

In contrast to the romantic picture of an egocentrically playful form of life that is lazily carried along by the present moment and dominated by reflected pleasure, Kierkegaard opposes the ethically resolute conduct of life. The latter demands that I *gather* myself and detach myself from the dependencies of an overwhelming environment, jolting myself to the awareness of my individuality and freedom. Once I am emancipated from a self-induced objectification, I also gain distance from myself as an individual. I pull myself out from the anonymous, scattered life that is breathlessly disintegrating into fragments and give my life continuity and transparency. In the social dimension, such a person can assume responsibility for his or her own actions and can enter into binding commitments with others. In the temporal dimension, concern for oneself makes one conscious of the historicity of an existence that is realized in the simultaneously interpenetrating horizons of future and past.

Kierkegaard tacitly assumes that as a self-consciously existing individual, one continuously gives an account of one's life in light of the Sermon on the Mount. He does not waste many words on the moral standards themselves, which found secular expression in Kant's egalitarian universalism. Rather, all his attention is on the structure of the ability to be oneself, that is, on the form of an ethical self-reflection and self-choice that is determined by the infinite interest in the success of one's own life-project. With a view toward future possibilities of action, the individual self-critically appropriates the past of her factually given, concretely re-presented life history. Only then does

she make herself into a person who speaks for herself, an irreplaceable individual.

Such an individual regrets the reproachable aspects of his past life and resolves to continue only in those ways of acting in which he can recognize himself without shame. In this way, he articulates the self-understanding of the person he would like others to know and acknowledge. Through a morally scrupulous evaluation and critically probing appropriation of his factually given life history, he constitutes himself as the person he both is and would like to be:

Everything that is posited in his freedom belongs to him essentially, however accidental it may seem to be. . . . This distinction is not a product of his arbitrariness so that he might seem to have absolute power to make himself into what it pleased him to be. . . . To be sure, the ethical individual dares to employ the expression that he is his own editor, but he is also fully aware that he is responsible, responsible for himself personally . . . responsible to the order of things in which he lives, responsible to God.⁴

Kierkegaard is convinced that the ethical form of existence produced by one's own efforts can be stabilized only in the relation of the believer to God. As long as we ground morality as the standard for self-scrutiny in human knowledge (as in the Socratic or Kantian approaches), the motivation for converting moral judgments into practice is lacking. Kierkegaard objects not so much to the cognitive meaning of morality as to its intellectualistic misunderstanding. If morality could move the will of the knowing subject *solely* through good reasons, then we could not explain that desolate condition against which Kierkegaard as critic of the contemporary age directed his barbs again and again – the condition of an enlightened and morally self-righteous, but deeply corrupt Christian society: "It is tragic-comic to see that all this knowledge and understanding exercises no power at all over men's lives."⁵

The cynical acceptance of an unjust world, the normality of repression for so many people, is evidence not of a deficit in *knowledge* but of a corruption of the *will*. The human beings who could know better do not *want* to understand. For this reason, Kierkegaard does not speak of guilt, but of sin. However, as soon as we interpret guilt as sin, we know that we have need of forgiveness and that we must set our hope on an absolute power that can intervene retroactively in the course of history and can *restore* the wounded order as well as the integrity of the victims. The promise of salvation forms the motivating connection between an unconditionally demanding morality and care for oneself. A postconventional morality of conscience can become the seed around which a conscious life conduct thus can crystallize only if it is embedded in a religious self-understanding. Kierkegaard develops the problem of motivation over and against Socrates and Kant in order to go beyond both of them and arrive at Christ.

To be sure, Climacus – Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous author of *Philosophical Fragments* – is not at all sure that the Christian message of redemption, which he considers hypothetically as a “project” for thought, is “more true” than the immanent thinking that moves within the postmetaphysical boundaries of neutrality towards worldviews.⁶ Thus, Kierkegaard presents Anticlimacus as one who does not try to compel his secular counterpart with argument but aims rather to induce him with the help of a psychological phenomenology “to go beyond Socrates.”

Drawing on symptomatic forms of life, Kierkegaard describes the visible forms of a healing “sickness unto death” – the patterns of a despair that is initially repressed, then creeps into awareness, and finally forces conversion on an ego-centered consciousness. These forms of despair are so many manifestations of the lack of a fundamental relationship that alone could make an authentic being-oneself possible. Kierkegaard depicts the unsettling condition of a person who is indeed aware of her destiny, that she must

be a self, but thereupon flees into the alternatives: "in despair not to will to be oneself. Or even lower: in despair not to will to be a self. Or lowest of all: in despair to will to be someone else."⁷ The one who finally realizes that the despair has its source not in circumstances but in one's own flight responses will make the defiant, but equally unsuccessful attempt "to will to be oneself." The hopeless failure of this last act of will – the stubborn wanting to be oneself entirely on the basis of one's own resources – pushes finite spirit to transcend itself and recognize its dependence on an Other as the ground of its own freedom.

This conversion marks the turning point in the movement of overcoming the secularized self-understanding of modern reason. For Kierkegaard describes this rebirth with a formulation that recalls the opening paragraphs of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehren*, yet at the same time inverts the autonomous sense of the deed [*Tathandlung*] into its opposite: "In relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it."⁸ The fundamental relation that makes being-onself possible as the form of right living thereby becomes visible. Although the literal reference to a "power" as the ground of being-able-to-be-onself need not be understood in a religious sense, Kierkegaard insists that the human spirit can arrive at a right understanding of its finite existence only through the awareness of sin: the self exists authentically [*wahrhaftig*] only in the presence of God. The self survives the stages of hopeless despair only in the form of a believer, who by relating herself to herself relates to an absolutely Other to whom she owes everything.⁹

Kierkegaard emphasizes that we cannot form any consistent concept of God – neither *via eminentiae* nor *via negationis*. Each idealization remains captive to the basic predicates from which the operation of intensification takes its point of departure. And the attempt of the understanding to characterize the absolutely Other by negating all finite determinations fails for the same reason: "The

understanding cannot even think the absolutely different; it cannot absolutely negate itself but uses itself for that purpose and consequently thinks the difference in itself."¹⁰ The chasm between knowing and believing cannot be bridged by thought.

Kierkegaard's philosophical followers naturally find this point annoying. To be sure, even Socratic thinkers who cannot invoke revealed truths can follow the suggestive phenomenology of the "sickness unto death" and can agree that finite spirit depends on enabling conditions beyond its control. The ethically conscious conduct of life should not be understood as narrow-minded self-empowerment. They could also agree with Kierkegaard that we should not understand this dependence on a power beyond our control in naturalistic terms, but above all as an interpersonal relation. For the defiance of a rebellious person who finally in despair wills to be herself is directed – as defiance – against a second person. Under the premises of postmetaphysical thinking, however, the power beyond us – on which we subjects capable of speech and action depend in our concern not to fail to lead worthwhile lives – cannot be identified with "God in time."

The linguistic turn permits a deflationary interpretation of the "wholly Other." As historical and social beings we find ourselves always already in a linguistically structured lifeworld. In the forms of communication through which we reach an understanding with one another about something in the world and about ourselves, we encounter a transcending power. Language is not a kind of private property. No one possesses exclusive rights over the common medium of the communicative practices we must intersubjectively share. No single participant can control the structure, or even the course, of processes of reaching understanding and self-understanding. How speakers and hearers make use of their communicative freedom to take yes- or no-positions is not a matter of their subjective discretion. For they are free only in virtue of the binding force of the justifiable claims they raise toward one

another. The *logos* of language embodies the power of the intersubjective, which precedes and grounds the subjectivity of speakers.

This weak proceduralist reading of the "Other" preserves the fallibilist as well as the anti-skeptical meaning of the "unconditioned." The *logos* of language escapes our control, and yet we are the ones, the subjects capable of speech and action, who reach an understanding with one another in this medium. It remains "our" language. The unconditionedness of truth and freedom is a necessary presupposition of our practices, but beyond the constituents of "our" form of life they lack any ontological guarantee. Similarly, the "right" ethical self-understanding is neither revealed nor "given" in some other way. It can only be won in a common endeavor. From this perspective, what makes our being-ourselves possible appears more as a transsubjective power than an absolute one.



Even if we adopt this postreligious perspective, Kierkegaard's postmetaphysical ethics permits us to characterize a not-unsuccessful life. His general statements about the modes of being-able-to-be-oneself are formal – that is, they are not *thick* descriptions – but they by no means lack normative content. Because this ethics judges the existential *mode*, but not the specific orientation of, individual life-projects and particular forms of life, it satisfies the conditions of a pluralism of worldviews. This postmetaphysical abstention runs up against its limits in an interesting way as soon as questions of a "species ethics" arise. As soon as the ethical self-understanding of language-using agents is at stake *in its entirety*, philosophy can no longer avoid taking a substantive position.

It is just this situation that we find ourselves in today. The advance of the biological sciences and development of biotechnologies at the threshold of the new century do

not just expand familiar possibilities of action, they enable a new type of intervention. What hitherto was "given" as organic nature, and could at most be "bred," now shifts to the realm of artifacts and their production. To the degree that even the human organism is drawn into this sphere of intervention, Helmuth Plessner's phenomenological distinction between "being a body" and "having a body" becomes surprisingly current: the boundary between the nature that we "are" and the organic endowments we "give" to ourselves disappears.¹¹ As a result, a new kind of self-transformation, one that reaches into the depth of the organic substrate, emerges for the intervening subject. The self-understanding of this subject now determines how one wants to use the opportunities opened up with this new scope for decision – to proceed *autonomously* according to the standards governing the normative deliberations that enter into democratic will formation, or to proceed *arbitrarily* according to subjective preferences whose satisfaction depends on the market. In putting the question this way, I am not taking the attitude of a cultural critic opposed to welcome advances of scientific knowledge. Rather, I am simply asking whether, and if so how, the implementation of these achievements affects our self-understanding as responsible agents.

Do we want to treat the categorically new possibility of intervening in the human genome as an increase in freedom that requires normative *regulation* – or rather as self-empowerment for transformations that depend simply on our preferences and do not require any *self-limitation*? Even if this fundamental question is decided in favor of the first alternative, one can dispute the boundaries of a negative eugenics that would aim at overcoming unmistakable evils. Here I will only point out one aspect of the underlying problem – the challenge posed by the modern understanding of freedom. The decoding of the human genome opens up the prospect of interventions that cast a peculiar light on a condition of our normative self-understanding, a condition that, although natural and

thus far unthematized, now turns out nonetheless to be essential.

Up to now, both the secular thought of European modernity and religious belief could proceed on the assumption that the genetic endowment of the newborn infant, and thus the initial organic conditions for its future life history, lay beyond any programming and deliberate manipulation on the part of other persons. To be sure, adults can submit their own life histories to critical evaluation and retrospective revision. Our life histories are made from a material that we can "make our own" and "responsibly take possession of," in Kierkegaard's sense. What is placed at our disposal today is something else: the previous *uncontrollability* of the contingent process of human fertilization that results from what is now an *unforeseeable* combination of two different sets of chromosomes. However, this rather ordinary contingency proves to be – in the very moment we can master it – a necessary presupposition for being-able-to-be-oneself and for the fundamentally egalitarian nature of our interpersonal relationships. For as soon as adults treat the desirable genetic traits of their descendants as a product they can shape according to a design of their own liking, they are exercising a kind of control over their genetically manipulated offspring that intervenes in the somatic bases of another person's spontaneous relation-to-self and ethical freedom. This kind of intervention should only be exercised over things, not persons. For this reason, later generations can demand an account from the programmers of their genome; they can hold these producers responsible for what they, the offspring, consider the unwanted consequences of the organic starting point of their life histories. This new structure of attribution results from obliterating the boundary between persons and things. One can see this, for example, in the case of the parents of a handicapped child who hold their physician responsible for the material consequences of a mistaken prenatal diagnosis and undertake a civil suit for "compensatory

damages" – as though the medically unexpected handicap were tantamount to damage to one's property.

A previously unheard-of interpersonal relationship arises when a person makes an irreversible decision about the natural traits of another person. This new type of relationship offends our moral sensibility because it constitutes a foreign body in the legally institutionalized relations of recognition in modern societies. When one person makes an irreversible decision that deeply intervenes in another's organic disposition, the fundamental symmetry of responsibility that exists among free and equal persons is restricted. We have a fundamentally different kind of freedom toward the fate produced through the contingencies of our socialization than we would have toward the prenatal production of our genome. The developing adolescent will one day be able to take responsibility for her own life history; she will be able to take possession of what she is. That is, she can relate to her process of development reflectively, work out a *revisionary* self-understanding, and in a probing manner retrospectively restore the balance to the asymmetrical responsibility that parents have for their children's upbringing. This possibility of a self-critical appropriation of one's own developmental history is not available in regard to genetically manipulated dispositions. Rather, the adult would remain blindly dependent on the nonrevisable decision of another person, without any opportunity to establish the symmetrical responsibility required if one is to enter into a retroactive ethical self-reflection as a process among *peers*. For this poor soul there are only two alternatives, fatalism and resentment.

Would this situation change significantly if we expanded the scenario of the embryo's objectification in favor of the adult's self-objectifying correction of her *own* genome? In this case as in the previous one, the consequences show that the breadth of biotechnological interventions raises moral questions that are not simply difficult in the familiar sense but are of an *altogether different kind*.

The answers touch on the ethical self-understanding of humanity as a whole. The European Union's Charter of Basic Rights that was agreed to in Nice already takes into consideration the circumstance that procreation and birth are losing the element of natural uncontrollability that so far was essential for our normative self-understanding. Article 3, which guarantees the right to bodily and mental integrity, contains "the prohibition against eugenic practices, especially those that have as their goal the selection of persons," as well as "the prohibition against the reproductive cloning of human beings."¹² But have not these traditional European value orientations, however worthy, already become merely out-of-date fashions?

Do we still want to understand ourselves as normative creatures – indeed, what role should morality and law play in the regulation of social interaction that could as well get rearranged in norm-free functionalist terms? Naturalistic alternatives are currently under discussion. These alternatives include not only the reductionistic proposals of natural scientists but also the adolescent speculations about the superior artificial intelligence of future generations of robots.

As a result, the ethics of *successfully being oneself* has become one among several alternatives. Formal arguments no longer suffice to maintain the substance of this self-understanding in the face of competing proposals. Rather, today the original philosophical question concerning the "good life" in all its anthropological generality appears to have taken on new life. The new technologies make a public discourse on the right understanding of cultural forms of life in general an urgent matter. And philosophers no longer have any good reasons for leaving such a dispute to biologists and engineers intoxicated by science fiction.