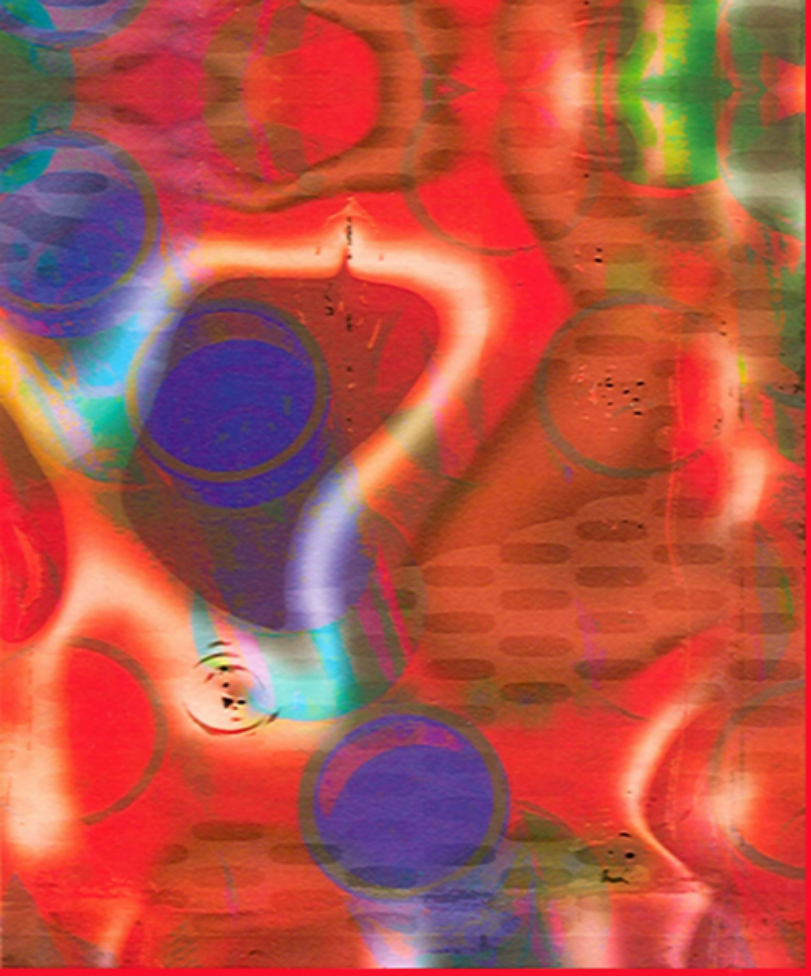

The Future of Human Nature

JÜRGEN HABERMAS

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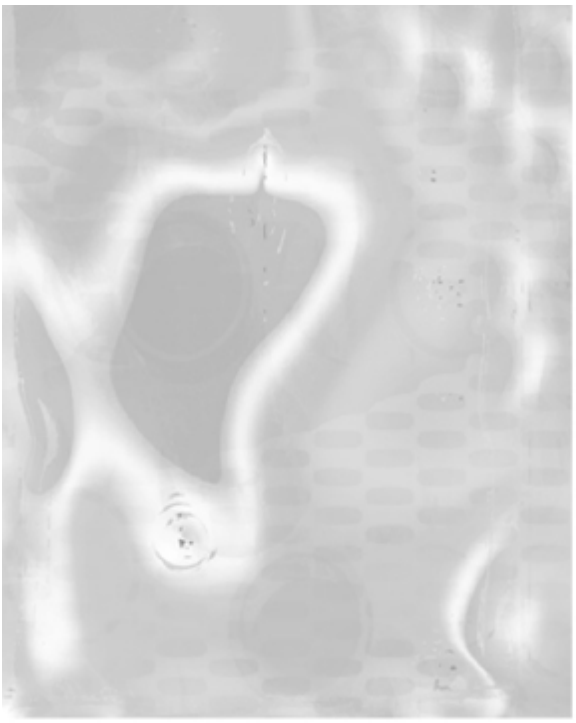

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Foreword

On the occasion of receiving the Dr Margrit Egnér Prize for the year 2000, I delivered a lecture on September 9 of that year at the University of Zurich that served as the basis for the first of the texts reproduced here. I proceed on the basis of a distinction between a Kantian theory of justice and a Kierkegaardian ethics of subjectivity, and defend the restraint that postmetaphysical thinking exercises regarding binding positions on substantive questions of the good or the un-misspent life. This is the contrasting background for an opposing question that arises in light of the debates touched off by genetic technology: Can philosophy tolerate this same restraint in questions of a species ethics as well?

The main text, an expanded version of the Christian Wolf Lecture given at Marburg University on June 28, 2001, is an entrance into this debate that does not relinquish the premises of postmetaphysical thinking. So far, this debate over genetic research and technology has circled around the question of the moral status of prepersonal human life without results. I therefore adopt the perspective of a future present, from which we might someday perhaps look back on currently controversial practices as the first steps toward a liberal eugenics regulated by supply and demand. Embryonic research and preimplantation genetic diagnosis excite strong emo-tions above all because they exemplify a danger that is bound to the metaphor of “human breeding.” Not without reason, we worry over the possible emergence of a thick intergenerational web of actions for which no one can be called to account, because it one-sidedly cuts vertically through the contemporary network of interactions. Therapeutic goals, by contrast, on which all

genetic technological procedures ought to be based, draw narrow boundaries for each and every intervention. From the therapeutic perspective, one must assume an attitude toward a second person whose consent has to be taken into account.

The postscript to the main text, written at year's end, responds to objections less as a revision than as a clarification of my original intentions.

The third text is based on a speech I delivered on October 14, 2001, on the occasion of my reception of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. It takes up a question that has gained new relevance in the wake of September 11: What does an ongoing “secularization” within already secularized societies demand of the citizens of a democratic constitutional state, that is, from the faithful and the unfaithful alike?

Starnberg, December 31, 2001

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.”

I

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 advantages 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,