I. Biomedical rationalisations of “life”, reproduction and responsibility? Historical, social and ethical perspectives

1. Biological Reproduction, Offspring, and Radical Otherness

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Today we are confronted with a huge mass of literature on bioethics, biomedicine, biopolitics, and biotechnical issues – rubrics under which problems of human reproduction are regularly treated as the epistemological object of the life sciences. The technical term "reproduction" refers by way of abstraction to the complex of human sexuality and gender, fertility, pregnancy, birth, parenting and the forms of life in which offspring are taken care of (cf. Almond 1988; Liebsch 2001; Boelderl 2006; Schües 2008, 2016/17; Liebsch 2016). The life sciences are therefore at least indirectly related to human relations between persons, their love, their successive, interconnected and divergent filiations and histories.

In view of the fact that the human species evolved over thousands of years from its pre-human predecessors, it is astonishing that key factors of human reproduction such as the fertilization of sperm and egg cell were not discovered until the late 19th century, when Oscar Hertwig demonstrated (in 1876) how it works in sea urchins. Since then, the life sciences have had a largely uncontested authority in matters of human reproduction. Today, they seem to have the final say when it comes to the question of how exactly human reproduction "works," how it can fail and how it could be optimized, and so on.

This holds true in spite of the obvious fact that the life sciences often present themselves in unfamiliar terms which, consequently, must be translated to the public, who are normally incapable of understanding sophisticated bio-technical concepts adequately. While – for example – the abbreviation DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) and the term *genetic code* are well known, the public associates them with more or less naïve ideas about human heredity, about genes as bio-chemical mechanisms of "encoding" or determining parental "traits," and about the technical devices for rearranging them in order to enhance or prevent expected outcomes… In contrast to what most people may

think, DNA is not "written" in a linear fashion so as to be "readable" and to be "edited" like a book (cf. Blumenberg 1986; Kay 2005). Only in very specific cases do genes predetermine phenotypic outcomes. Even an identical set of genotypic material normally unfolds into quite different histories of individual human beings… In spite of obvious problems in adequately "translating" concepts and results of the life sciences into lay understandings of human reproduction, ordinary people are left with the task of uncovering how our current knowledge works, fails, or misleads.

This raises the question of where philosophical reflection on human reproduction can (and perhaps must) make a distinctive contribution (cf. Canguilhem 1974 [1942/1996]: 150). Must it, too, succumb to the authority of the life sciences, acknowledge and recognize that authority without qualification (cf. Böhme 1980; Feyerabend 1981)? Should it confine itself to problems that arise in the application of biomedical and biotechnical knowledge to the life world of human beings who, in their more or less naïve way of "reproducing" themselves, have at best an inadequate understanding of their fertility? Or should it assist them in their resistance to the "colonialization" of the life-world through the supreme power of biological and medical knowledge, that demands that such knowledge must be properly applied and thus that our generative relations should be rationalized in every respect – in spite of the fact that "c'est hors des laboratoires que les vivants croient vivre d'une vie dont ils ne savent pas tous qu'au laboratoire elle a perdu sa vie avec son secret. C'est hors des laboratoires que l'amour, la naissance et la mort continuent à présenter aux vivants, enfants de l'ordre et du hasard, les figures immémoriales de ces questions que la science des vivants ne pose plus désormais à la vie" ("It is outside laboratories that the living continue to believe they live a life, not all of them being aware that life itself has lost its life and mystery in the laboratory. Outside the laboratory, love, birth and death continue to present to the living, these children of order and chance, the timeless figures of these questions, which the science of the living today no longer poses to life" (Canguilhem 1971: 25).

To be sure, the relations between knowledge and the life-world, epistemology, and being in the world are not that simple. They do not simply pose the question of mere application or of subjugation… This becomes obvious when we take into account the readiness with which many people are willing to understand themselves and their offspring as biological creatures who should abide by the laws that seem to determine the *lógos* of human forms of life (*bíoi*) everywhere. In this respect, Aldous Huxley's dystopic vision of a despotic gov-

ernment that controls the reproduction of its underlings misses the point, insofar as people are willing to submit, paradoxically, to the "self-chosen diktat" that human fertility should be the object of willed, biologically rationalized production and reprogramming (Bernard 2014: 443).

In the following discussion, I confine myself to identifying basic ontological assumptions that are implicitly at work in the lay understanding of human reproduction, insofar as it orients itself to a (more or less naïve) concept of what people believe to be the "laws" of the biological realm.

The fact that we can and (ultimately) must understand ourselves as biological beings goes without saying for almost everybody. However, biology is a neologism that did not come into use in Europe until the first decade of the 19th century, when it was adopted by authors such as Jean B. Lamarck, Gottfried R. Treviranus, and Friedrich Burdach (Klein 1954; Canguilhem et al. 1960; Jacob 1972; Lepenies 1978). Prepared by forerunners of Charles Darwin and Alfred R. Wallace (Glass, Temkin and Straus 1959), a biological and evolutionary understanding of human life in every respect rapidly began to dominate even political and especially state-centred thought – at times with disastrous consequences (Engels 1995; Claeys 2000). While it seemed to *become "self-evident"* that we *are* biological beings, it was forgotten that this is a matter of human self-understanding. In the preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) Maurice Merleau-Ponty drew his readers' attention to this basic insight: We can be *interpreted as* biological beings, but we *are* not "*in fact*" to be equated with such creatures (Merleau-Ponty 1945: v). While several philosophers – from Wilhelm Dilthey and Helmuth Plessner to Hans Jonas – have rightly insisted that we need a hermeneutics of life that pays tribute to the contestable understanding of human beings *as* biological organisms, we find that the significance of the hermeneutic latitude indicated by this "as" is very often simply forgotten (Jonas 1973; Plessner 1975; Rodi and Lessing 1984).

Here, I cannot try to uncover the profound reasons for this result. Instead, I presuppose that we have to start by accepting that it is now largely uncontested that we are biological beings and that our generative relations must be conceptualized, possibly reconstructed, and even eventually refigured as biological relations in keeping with the laws of life. Seen this way, it is *the result of our cultural history* that a biological self-image of human beings is prevalent today.

This is not to say this self-image is exclusively dominant. On the contrary: there are many signs of dissension, contradiction, and conflict. Some bemoan that intervening in human generativity will eventually dethrone God as the

supreme creator. Others claim that such an endeavour is "against nature", and anticipate the horrors of the planned, serial fabrication of human beings (Bernard 2014: 197). Less frightened, others ask sensitively and mournfully – as if already remembering a past that is lost forever – whether there is no difference between the "cool" fusion of cells in a laboratory and the passionate intercourse between human beings in their direct, personal encounters (ibid: 378, 435).

Ironically, it is precisely this seemingly "romantic" understanding of human generativity that ultimately puts it down to "dialogical" relations, normally heterosexual, between human beings, which has gained support in at least one important respect from modern biology. In striking contrast to former conceptions of creation such as Nicolas Malebranche's (cf. Liebsch 1997: ch. 3; Bernard 2014: 37), modern epigenetic theories from the late 18th century onwards (Blumenbach 1830: 14; Bernard 1878: 316; Temkin 1950) have made it plain that fertilization and the ontogenetic development that it engenders does not simply make visible a preformed entity; rather, it must be understood as the *original production* of a new living being (Needham 1934; Löw 1980: 101; Lenoir 1981, 1982; Gould 1985; Bernard 2014: 42, 50).

Each time, we are dealing with a new creation – out of biological material, to be sure, provided by a human couple who instigate the unforeseeable production of a new human being whose future possibility cannot be reduced to what seemed to be possible before (Richards 1987). Thus, this human being is "made possible" (*ermöglicht*) without ever being simply the result of causal predetermination or of a plan, as the template of the future of one *another*. It was primarily Henri Bergson who heralded the philosophical implications of this specifically modern understanding of the emergence of the *irreducibly new* (Bergson 1907), closely related to American pragmatism (Charles S. Peirce, William James, James M. Baldwin, etc.) and to the genetic epistemology upon which, in turn, Jean Piaget predicated his biological theory of knowledge (Liebsch 1992), before Emmanuel Levinas referred to Henri Bergson in his conception of a "radical" future that cannot be anticipated as it irreversibly divides parents and offspring (Levinas 1947: 63).

This connection between the notion of a "radical" future that cannot be de-futurized is closely linked to the history of modern biology. At the same time, it has changed our understanding of human generativity in an unforeseen manner which is relevant to our present situation. Taking this connection into account warns us not to believe that the aforementioned challenges to a comprehensive biologisation of the human self-image that has recourse to

God, nature or the dialogical character of human relations could simply draw on a previous non-biological model.

The same objection that advocates of the "primacy of the social" have to face when they contest the authority of the life sciences in all respects also has to do with human generativity. No clear-cut notion of "the social" was available before modern biological thought launched its astounding career, reaching a climax in the 20th century (Röttgers 1996; Liebsch 2018: ch. 1). If the authority of the life sciences regarding human generativity is nevertheless not indisputable, the question arises as to what alternatives could otherwise be considered.

I propose here to draw on the resources of human negativity. While the hegemony of biological, bioethical and biotechnical thought cannot be denied, it would be an exaggeration to claim that it dominates us with no resistance. The triumph of the biological, bioethical and biotechnical is not yet complete. In spite of the widespread eagerness to understand problems of life and living, death and dying, primarily as matters of biology, in the life world it collides with heterogenous understandings of what it means to live, to be alive, to live a liveable life, and to promise others such a life. By "others" I have in mind offspring who cannot (before their conception) be asked by their progenitors whether or not they would accept being "thrown" into the world as it currently presents itself.

For Immanuel Kant, and many others who follow the same lines today, this most basic insight acts as a gatekeeper for any debate about human generativity. Every debate circling around related questions will concern future human beings who cannot be asked for their agreement or consent as regards their future existence under conditions that to a great extent are inevitably unforeseeable. According to Levinas, the "grand scandale de la condition humaine" ("the great scandal of the human condition") is "que nous n'avons pas choisi notre naissance" ("that we have not chosen our birth" Levinas 2009: 109, 156). In a Kantian perspective it directly follows that every person directly or indirectly responsible for the future existence of others is accountable (Habermas 2002). Paradoxically, this accountability refers to others who do not yet exist and cannot hold anyone accountable at all. When this becomes possible, many others who in turn would have to give account to them can no longer be called to account for what they have done or refrained from doing…

I cannot go into the details of the complicated time-structure of human responsibility and accountability in terms of human generativity here (cf. Abe 2017). Instead, I shall focus on several implications of the widespread biolo-

gisation of human generativity that seem particularly to provoke objections – thus indicating how human negativity resists the hegemony of a biological, bioethical and biotechnical mentality – without relying on a notion of God, nature or society that was allegedly previously available.

The *biologisation of human generativity* rests on the following *basic tenets*:

(1) Human beings are organisms and, thus, composed of cells, the basic units of biology.
(2) *Omnis cellula e cellula* (Bernard 2014: 68). The origin of cells is the division of pre-existing cells. In other words: *Omne vivum ex vivo* – at times translated as follows: "Every living thing comes from a living thing." The physiologist Rudolf Virchow and his predecessors extended this to state that the only source for a living cell was another living cell.
(3) Consequently, as regards sexual reproduction, modern biology confines itself once and for all to the level of organic material that is capable of fusion, fertilization, division and multiplication. Thus, sexual reproduction and descent are understood as a question of recombination of biological "things" (ultimately, chromosomes, triplets of nitrogenous bases…) – severed from sexual relations between persons and their generative, familial and generational perspectives such as motherhood, fatherhood, childhood.

Consequently, the recombination, manipulation and quasi-industrial handling of human reproduction has become possible. *Reproduction itself seems to be reproducible* via willed, biochemical intervention by "third" subjects, who are technically able to produce human beings in test tubes *in vitro*… so that "partners" as subjects of human generativity are no longer necessary. The production of human beings in laboratories is simply a matter of transforming infrastructures of "something," i.e. cells (determined by chromosomes), into living beings.

Human life, however, can only be *initiated* in laboratories. Its inevitably historical "development" can only take place in forms of life where it is taken care of as the life not of "something" but, rather, of *somebody*. Therefore, any previous biological "abstraction" from the context of social forms of life where motherhood, fatherhood and childhood take shape must be re-embedded in their generative horizons.

Currently, any such attempt to re-embed a biological understanding of human reproduction faces serious difficulties since the destabilization of tradi-

tional concepts such as begetting (*Zeugung*) with the necessity of heterosexual relations, of their fertility, of their community and of the very relatedness that was commonly held to manifest itself in familial relationships of motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood.

This destabilization does not lend itself to the "rehabilitation" of a traditionality that would simply reject the modern biologisation of human reproduction altogether. On the contrary, it forces us to take human reproduction seriously by negating what seems to be "unacceptable," to the extent that this biologisation amounts not just to a reduction but rather to a downright *reductionism* of human generativity.

It cannot be denied that it is possible to understand human beings *as* organisms, that is, as living "things" determined by chromosomes, self-regulatory homeorhetic mechanisms etc. Unacceptable reductionism, however, results from this if we forget the hermeneutic "as" that inevitably comes into play here. Something that can be understood "as" something else, is, precisely for this reason, not identical with this something else.

The denial of a reductionist understanding of human generativity leads us, by way of negation, to the following propositions:

(1) Biological cell theory, prenatal testing of chromosomes and genes, and techniques of fertilization refer directly to "living things"; indirectly, however, they refer to the future of children, that is, of others whose otherness proves to be unforeseeable. The "authentic future" (Levinas) of others cannot validly be subjected to defuturisation.
(2) It is nevertheless reasonable to expect that these future children will normally be able to relate to their own life as the life of somebody (not something), and to those people who are directly or indirectly responsible for its inception (Esposito 2017: 15) in order to "check back" about the origin and causes of and reasons for their conception, their "being welcomed" (or neglected…), their being cared for (more or less adequately…), being acknowledged and accepted, etc. (or abandoned…).
(3) These and related questions pivot around the central problem that confronts the unforeseeable life of an "other": whether or not it is possible to live a life that proves to be really "*liveable*". What counts as a "liveable life" (Butler 2009) depends on every individual's own judgement. (Kant was already keenly aware of this. The most basic question regarding human generativity, he wrote in his *Critique of Judgement* (1977: 394), is whether or not a future human being will be "content" with his or her existence – in spite

of its very finitude and mortality, that is [we could add], in spite of being exposed to pain, injury and vulnerability, to misfortune and violence of all sorts.)

(4) Seen this way, the yardstick of any decision to "have a baby," to "reproduce" oneself in one's offspring, to augment one's people, to strengthen its biopolitical potential, and therefore to intervene in someone's biological constitution, etc. is an anticipated responsibility in the retrograde perspective of somebody who does not yet exist and who will be an "other" – in the most radical sense philosophy has to offer, to be sure, that is, in the sense of a *radical otherness* that is paradoxically "other than itself" without remaining the same and without being sublatable in a dialectics of identity (Ricœur 1990: ch. 10).

(5) That every human individual is an "other" in this "strong sense" cannot, however, be demonstrated or proven. We can only *testify to* this (cf. Ricœur 1994 [1972]; Liebsch 2012) – and how the promise to vouch for the radical alterity of the other in practical life is kept or betrayed – thus objecting to any "appropriation" of human life through the seemingly sovereign power of progenitors, peoples or the state that wants to capitalize on its biopolitical resources.[1]

1 Cf. Birenbaum-Carmeli (2010). The author draws attention to "the outstanding importance that the state [of Israel] attributes to genetic reproduction. Additionally, the admission of practically every woman, without any screening, to funded care conveys the state's view that any genetic family formation is solid and competent enough to comprise a favourable living environment for the baby that it helps to create. This inclusive policy has often been attributed by researchers to the Biblical commandment 'Be fruitful and multiply' and to the impact of the Holocaust trauma and the state's demographic interest in Jewish growth. However, these motivations to expand the local Jewish population could in principle be fulfilled by social kinning as well. After all, adopted children, including ones adopted abroad, are converted into Judaism and count as full Jewish Israeli citizens. This line of argumentation thus provides no explanation for the state preference for genetic relatedness" (2010: 81). Birenbaum-Carmeli then offers an explanation for this discrepancy in political terms: "[The] blood-based definition mythically connects contemporary Jewish Israelis to Biblical times. As such it can be tacitly embedded into political territorial claims to *eretz avotenu*, the 'land of our forefathers.' Now, if the pursuit of genetic kinship is an element in substantiating the state's geopolitical claims, then the import of genetic kinship transcends the domain of family relations, to the survival of the historical/mythical collectivity as a political vehicle. Possibly, it is an interest in this 'resource,' the genetic 'essence' of the Jewish collectivity, that may account for the sharp dichotomy between full state support to technologies that aim to accomplish genetic kinship and complete denial of state sup-

(6) That we feel obliged to testify to the radical otherness of any other must be understood as a lesson to be learned from the biopolitical power that reached its zenith in Nazi ideology (cf. Liebsch 2019). The negativity of this historical experience motivates our objections to any reductionist treatment of human life as a matter of technical reproduction. It might be helpful for limited purposes to *understand* human life *as* reproducible. In doing so, however, we run the risk of "forgetting" that this may amount to a fatal reductionism that would ultimately eliminate any radical alterity (Esposito 2017: 58) between generations, generative subjects and offspring.

In a thesis like this, the assertion that "we" feel obliged to testify to the radical alterity of the other may appear highly contestable. Therefore, in the final section of my outline of relations between biological reproduction, offspring, and radical otherness I wish to briefly draw attention to a couple of questions that such a claim raises.

Who is this "we"? To whom does it refer? Only to those of us who keep in mind the history of Nazi biopolitics in a way that arouses such a feeling of obligation? Or does an obligation to testify to the radical alterity of the other exist irrespective of our remembrance and our feelings? Is it plausible to maintain that decades of intense historiographic documentation of this type of biopolitics have led to the conclusion that the radical alterity of the other "in fact" evades any access and denies any appropriation? If this were the case, any demand to respect the alterity of the other would seem superfluous. To insist on such a demand would – in contrast – imply that the otherness of the other cannot itself effectively resist any form of violence (cf. Liebsch 2017).

These questions refer to a crossover of history and social philosophy – implying either that historical experience teaches us which consequences should be drawn in terms of a theory of alterity, or that we have to gather from a social philosophy of alterity how the documented historical experience should be interpreted. However, it is quite clear that there is no well-established area of cooperation between social philosophy and history. The two disciplines follow

port from those routes that breach the genetic paradigm and aim for social kinship" (ibid: 82). – Yael Hashiloni-Dolev offers a historical explanation for the stark interest in strengthening the "essence" of the Israeli people: "[C]enturies of living in hostile societies led to a strengthening of family ties and obligations," and "fears of extinction translate[d] into pro-natalism" that seeks to secure the "essence" by way of biological multiplication (2018: 123).

largely different tracks – even though, to look only at the philosophical side, the work of many authors – from Hannah Arendt, Günther Anders, Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, Hans Jonas, and Sarah Kofman to Zygmunt Bauman and Edith Wyschogrod (to mention only a few) – appears to be imbued with the dark negativity of a historical disaster from which human reason has not yet recovered and from which it may well never recover completely. In this way Levinas seemed to read Blanchot's *L'écriture du désastre* as a form of writing at the crossroads of philosophy and history that remains forever wounded by the very darkness to which it testifies (Blanchot 1980; Levinas 1993; Liebsch 2020).

In his reference to human testimony that is devoted to the infinity of the other and thus opposes the enduring reign of this darkness, Levinas refrained from theological argumentation. Although he never made a secret of his "Jewish inspiration," he avoided any appeal to the alleged evidence of a religious revelation. "The religious," he claimed instead, must forever "remain suspicious" (Levinas 1937: 194). Whether or not he was consistent in this respect or simply took a random "theological turn" in his social philosophy is another question (Janicaud 2009, 2014). The central impulse of his thought was motivated by the attempt to uncover a binding-back or reconnecting (*religio*) to the appeal of the other as a radical (though not absolute) "other", who establishes our responsibility in such a way as to resist a biopolitics that ultimately denies any unconditional ethical relation to others at all. Initially, most of the victims could not believe that a genocidal form of biopolitics was even possible, and would indeed happen to them. But what does the undeniable possibility and historical reality of this form of excessive violence really prove? In Levinas' perspective it did *not* make it plain that the victims were "successfully" reduced to an "ethical nothing," to say the least. The mass murder was "ethically impossible," Levinas claimed, insofar as it had to try to breach a demand that strictly prohibited murder. The Nazi genocide was doomed to failure insofar as it was impossible to eliminate the injunction not to treat others that way. This injunction becomes obvious, Levinas tried to make his readers believe, *vis-à-vis* the other, any other, in view of his/her very otherness even when he/she is no longer able to speak.

As far as I can see, Levinas made no attempt to relate the ethical consequences he expected of any philosophy that deserves this name "after the genocide" (Levinas 1980) to problems of reproductive medicine and bioethics. This will disappoint readers who expect instructions from his work on what to do in relation to others yet to come into the world, who may well have to face all

sorts of violence. Levinas' first seminal work, *Totalité et infini* (1961), ascribes to the alterity of the other an exteriority that withdraws it from any conceptual and practical comprehension and appropriation, so that it also evades any war-like or genocidal violence (Levinas 1990 [1961]: 5). He then links this exteriority with the generative conception of filiations from which others emerge, who in turn will be handed over to surviving *other* others who cannot sublate the past of their predecessors in their own present. In this perspective on human alterity and generativity (which at first sight seems to have nothing to do with violence in general, or with genocide and war specifically), Levinas at least suggests normative conclusions such as the following: We *should respect the radical alterity* of the child even when it is not yet born; we *should never reduce it to any identity* (*mêmeté* or *ipséité*); and we *should release it again to its very otherness* if it temporarily runs the risk of falling prey to questionable genealogical, ethnic, historical or other identifications.

This way, Levinas appeals to the generative self-image of parents and any other persons who adopt or otherwise take care of children. But he refrains from any direct normative injunction to do this or that in the practice of responsibility. Nothing of this sort follows definitively from Levinas' social philosophy of alterity. He insists only on what he takes to be the most radical ethical "fact": that the alterity of the other is never at anyone's disposal. This holds true, he claims, in the darkness of the most extreme, excessive and radical forms of violence and in human generativity as well. Even when parents, educationalists of all sorts, and biopoliticians take this into account, they must, however, acknowledge their responsibility for embryos, children and any offspring in terms of their own identity. It is up to them to decide how it might be possible (*if at all*) to do justice to the radical otherness of descendants – and especially how they might protect it from "identitarian" identifications in contexts of social, cultural and political forms of life that raise complex questions of distribution, of equality, of neighbourhood, juridical integration etc.

It will never be enough to refer to the alterity of the other in order to find out what to do in given circumstances – as suggested by Hans Jonas, who maintains with respect to parental responsibility: "Look and you know [what you have to do]" (1982: 235). These rather cryptic words do *not* imply: "you know without any further consideration what you have to do in a given situation if you only notice what is already obvious" – namely: the other as radically "other". Not even *vis-à-vis* a single child is it immediately evident by way of careful "looking" what we have to do in order to do justice to this child (cf. Schäfer 2007).

Rather, Jonas calls to mind what is at stake *face à l'autre*: namely, one's own responsibility as such in view of this other and his/her very singularity (*Diesheit*) which was completely unforeseeable beforehand. One's responsibility refers to precisely *this* being in its "wholly contingent uniqueness" – which has in this case nothing to do with a normative claim that this single human being *deserves* to be treated responsibly, and nothing to do with a *previously existing contract* from which corresponding obligations would follow, Jonas adds.[2]

The "knowledge" to which Jonas refers does not arise from a normative and comparative judgment about what one has to do in a given situation, but emerges from the *páthos* (*Widerfahrnis*) of the ethical appeal of the child, which cannot be severed from its very bodily existence. It suffices that it is simply there in order to "give" us our responsibility; and this is a responsibility that we can deny or otherwise contest only afterwards. Jonas refers to this basic ethical "fact" as the "archetype of all responsibility," (1982: 98) which he deems to be realized *par excellence* in human parenthood. At the same time he knows very well how questionable such an appeal to alleged "evidence" must appear in many readers' eyes. It seems that instead of evidence in the strict sense he can offer only hypothetical considerations that suggest crosschecks such as: Where would it lead if we were to presuppose that in ethical terms literally nothing follows from the sheer presence of an other – especially nothing that would imply our responsibility *to* or *for* the other as such? Neither Jonas nor Levinas convincingly refers to uncontested and uncontestable evidence in this respect. They offer quite different concepts, such as *unicité*, singularity, and uniqueness in order to grasp the practical significance of the otherness of the other. Uniqueness is probably the most commonly known of them, whereas *unicité* and singularity raise complex problems of interpretation that cannot easily be pinned down in normal language (cf. Waldenfels 1995: 303).

From a biological point of view, human uniqueness can be explained through reduction to singular combinations of genes. The number of possible gene combinations far exceeds the number of real existing human beings in the world, says the biologist Peter Medawar (1969: 162). In this perspective,

2 "*Dieses* […] in seiner absolut kontingenten Einzigkeit ist es, dem jetzt die Verantwortung gilt – der einzige Fall, wo die 'Sache' nichts mit einer Beurteilung der Würdigkeit zu tun hat, nichts mit einem Vergleich, und nichts mit einem Vertrag" ("this in its wholly contingent uniqueness is that to which responsibility is now committed – the only case where the 'cause' one serves has nothing to do with appraisal of worthiness, nothing with comparison, and nothing with a contract" Jonas 1982: 241).

however, human uniqueness seems to be only a matter of biological *diversity* that fulfils the evolutionary function of preventing every species from running into a biological impasse (ibid: 194).

In contrast to this biological perspective taken by a theoretical observer outside evolution, philosophers such as Levinas and Jonas ground their notions of uniqueness, *unicité* and individuality *on the relation* to the other as such. We are not related to this other as a contingent objective occurrence in a neutral world of things and its earthly future, but rather by way of our being affected by his/her claim calling for our "dialogical" response. The idea that such an appeal to our response emerges from the very otherness of the other even when he/she cannot say a word (like the newborn infant [*infans*]), and even when he/she is not yet present in the world as a distinct being, makes no sense from a biological point of view. But this does not mean that uniqueness and radical otherness cannot be related. It only means that "biology" cannot do justice to this relationship.

Biology has no monopoly on the conceptualization of life *as* life. In fact, biology is the result of a *biologisation of a previous non-biological understanding of life* that rests on social interrelations of human beings who are – now more than ever – confronted with problems of the interpretation of (human) life *as (human) life*. In what sense does it deserve the attribute that it *is* human life? In what sense is a living being "*alive*"? How do living beings, from the very moment of becoming conscious of their life, *relate to their life as such*? How can they deem their *own* life to be truly *liveable*? These questions obviously transcend any biological concept of life – which we must regard *as a reduction* of previous, richer conceptions. Such a reduction may appear to be legitimate for scientific purposes – at least as long as the reduction is recognized as such. But if we forget that it is a reduction, the consequence will necessarily be a colonialization of the life world where we first experience our being related to others as such. And this consequence may finally amount to a far-reaching *forgetting of the differences between biological and social life* – so that ultimately the reduction is longer recognized at all. This may well be a dystopia. But what makes us sure that it does not loom ahead of us? Does the social philosophy of radical alterity promise sufficient resistance to the triumph of a biologistic culture that blurs the border between legitimate reductions and violent reductionisms of the meaning of life? Serious doubts in this respect cannot be denied. On the one hand, as indicated above, this social philosophy insists on a meaning of uniqueness that cannot be reduced to biological diversity. But on the other hand, insofar as it fails to draw normative consequences from this insight, it runs the risk of playing into

the hands of biopolitical positions that claim to demonstrate how one can deal with the genetic potential of every individual in order to secure the future of a family, a people or a nation – without any "residue" that deserves to be taken seriously. Is radical otherness ultimately to be regarded as such a "residue" – void of any concrete social and political significance that would make calls on our responsibility?

During the Third Reich the worst extremes of reductionist biopolitics became obvious. It was claimed that complete belonging to one's people (without "residue") is the only thing that "counts"[3] – in other words, there is no radical otherness to be taken seriously at all. From this historical experience we can draw the conclusion that the only form of biopolitics that can enjoy legitimacy is one that does not assume complete power over individuated human life. Life in this sense, however, cannot evade subjugation under totalitarian biopolitics simply by virtue of its uniqueness, or *unicité*, as Levinas would have it. To this day, it is open to question how the *withdrawal* of the other into radical otherness can be connected with a *relation* of others to forms of medically, ethically and politically motivated care. We move back and forth between *withdrawal of* and *relation to* the other as such – and no dialectical sublation of this tension has yet appeared. Not only can a "bad ambiguity" (in Merleau-Ponty's sense) be seen in this movement, but it can also enhance our consciousness of two forms of violence that linger before us: on the one hand, the biopolitical subjugation of everybody, irrespective of radical otherness, and on the other hand, the absolute retreat of the other into the darkness of a strangeness which ultimately fails to give us the least hint about how to do justice to others as such. In both respects we fail to come to terms with a world that calls for caring for others as such in complex contexts of forms of life.

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3 This seemed to follow directly from Hitler's dictum: "Nur eine Grenze kennen wir: Wer nicht zu unserem Volke gehört, für den rühren wir keinen Finger […], von uns hat er nichts zu erwarten." ("We know only one border: we do not lift a finger for those who do not belong to our people […], they can expect nothing from us," cited in Hamann 2002: 301).

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