Reflections on (In)Humanity

Volume 6

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**Approaching Humankind**

Towards an Intercultural Humanism

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This book has come into existence as part of a project on “Humanism in the Era of Globalization, an Intercultural Dialogue on Humanity, Culture and Values”. The project was carried out with the financial support of the Mercator Foundation, at the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut (Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities) in Essen (KWI) during the years 2006 to 2009 and has resulted in a considerable number of publications. Some texts from the German collections of essays dealing with the central aspects of the project are in this volume made accessible in English translations. The editor hopes that this will advance the cause of the international as well as intercultural work in the topic of humanism.

When the project was initiated, the topic of humanism was of no particular relevance in the humanities and appeared to be only of interest to experts on Western cultural history. The intercultural widening of the scope of a not irrelevant theme in Western cultural history was not being considered at the time. This has changed over the last few years, not least of all since this research project has spawned other projects with different affiliations as regards the institutions or the individuals involved, which are specifically concerned with the intercultural dimension. Occasionally there is even mention made of a ‘humanistic

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2 Esp. – in a shortened version – from Rüsen, Jörn (Ed.): Perspektiven der Humanität. Menschsein im Diskurs der Disziplinen, Bielefeld 2010 [Rüsen, Antweiler, Dux, Straub, Lenz, Schmidt-Glintzer] and from: Rüsen, Jörn/Laass, Henner (Eds.): Interkultureller Humanismus. Menschlichkeit in der Vielfalt der Kulturen, Schwalbach/Taunus 2009 [Cancik, Macamo, Roetz, Kozlarek]. – The contributions of Hüther, Oesterdiekhoff, Chattopadhyaya have not been published before.

3 I am referring here to the relevant projects initiated by the Berendel Foundation in London in the initiative of Sorin Antohi, especially the annual conference at Oxford University which are devoted to the topic of intercultural humanism.
turn’ in the humanities.\textsuperscript{4} In this respect the book might meet with a growing interest in the theme of humanism and contribute to providing a stimulus for new approaches to the topic through the results of the older project.

I would like to thank the Mercator Foundation for funding the project, the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities in Essen for its institutional support and the Berendel Foundation for financially supporting further research and publication ventures dedicated to humanism, in an intercultural perspective.

A special thanks go to Erhard Reckwitz and Shari Gilbertsen for their empathetic and competent translation. Thanks are also due to the authors who have gone to the trouble of reducing their texts to the limitations that were unavoidable in view of the wealth of material. I am also grateful that instead of translations of existing texts new texts could be admitted that the authors have made available instead of the ones originally envisaged. My special thanks are due to Sorin Antohi for his untiring effort on behalf of numerous projects on humanism and for his friendship while we jointly initiated and completed some of them.

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Bochum, January 2013

Jörn Rüsen

It is an essential part of being human not only just to exist and live one’s life, but in one’s existence and with regard to all aspects of life to constantly enquire about who one is and to organize one’s life in accordance with the answer to this question and to regulate one’s dealings with the world, with oneself and with one’s fellow human being. Man is unthinkable without this enquiry about himself and without seeking and finding an answer to this. He is forced – and that defines him as a cultural being – to make some kind of sense of his world and himself, of nature and others, because human life is only thinkable within the context of such meaningful orientation. Some kind of self-awareness of being a person only as a person forms part of this orientation indispensable for leading one’s life. This is commonly understood as a concept of humanity. In shaping the cultural conditions of his life man creates his own image. His life is thereby a reflective process. This type of reflection is to be found in all cultures, at all times and in all kinds of places, and of course it manifests itself in various shapes and forms. Depending on the context in which the question of what man is gets posed, the answer can vary. This variety has an *historical*, but also a *cognitive* dimension. From an historical perspective it manifests itself as the multifariousness of cultural life styles, and in the cognitive dimension the knowledge about mankind takes on the form of various cognitive practices. These days those practices are embodied by the sciences. Both dimensions are closely interwoven and cannot be clearly separated. Although certain scientific disciplines have evolved world-wide and within different cultural traditions, they nonetheless have to come to terms with the vitality of these traditions, not least of all because their insights have to be absorbed by the various life practices at work in different cultural contexts. In addition to this, the provenance of the humanities from the tradition of Western thought is becoming increasingly problematic. In a critical perspective their normative demands are contextualized, historicized and thereby potentially relativized. The knowledge about mankind accumulated by the humanities is about to be destroyed by the relativism of its cultural conditioning factors without there being a viable alternative in sight. What is
therefore required is to critically reconnect the insights gained by the humanities with their various cultural contexts. Such a reconnection need not necessarily lead to surrendering all the normative claims made by the various human sciences, but on the contrary: it can enrich these claims with the enormous wealth of cultural experience, which itself is the primary object of research in the humanities. The explicitly intercultural reflection upon the hermeneutical tools the humanities have to develop for this purpose has begun by now and there is no reason to doubt that they are going to be successful. The final aim should be a deepening and an extension for those methods for understanding which the humanities have evolved over the last 200 years of their existence and development.

It would be problematic, however, to regard the insights provided by the humanities as absolutely decisive or as the sole source for our existential orientation, thereby confirming the idea of being human to those forms of the cultural production of meaning the humanities are capable of providing. They are, indeed, necessary but not indispensible, even less so in view of the cognitive status of the epistemology underlying the human sciences currently undergoing a process of critical revision. Furthermore, it should not be overlooked that the normative claims of scientific knowledge derived from employing certain methodological procedures is based upon premises that have a limiting effect upon the meaning-making potential of the sciences. Human self-interpretation is not confined to rational acts of cognition but goes far beyond these, for instance in the sphere of the arts, in the field of everyday knowledge and also, of course, in that of religious belief, which even in the secular culture of modern civil society has not entirely lost its appeal. But without systematic thought, without the cognitive potential of reason, a useful self-awareness of human beings is not possible.

Another limitation of the cognitive achievements of the humanities as regards providing some practical orientation for human life consists in their multifariousness and high degree of differentiation, i.e. they appear as forms of knowledge that cannot be immediately equated with certain practical applications. For such a purpose those sciences that are focused on man as their object are too varied and too heterogeneous in terms of their approach and methodology. A comprehensive anthropology capable of viewing and explaining mankind in its totality does not exist: this applies even more because man as a cultural being is also part of nature, and hence nature and culture are thematized and researched in two completely incompatible epistemologies.

And yet, what is required is a comprehensive synthesis, or else the cultural orientation indispensible for human life-practices would have to have recourse to a kind of knowledge whose fragmentariness and heterogeneity runs counter to the demands made upon its ability to provide some orientation. Orientation
in this context means supplying a horizon of meaning for human life both in theoretical and practical terms, i.e. making part of the general objective guiding human action and of the way in which human beings cope with the experience of suffering. Horizons encompass the entire world and provide some point of reference for the human beings living in this world so that they know where they are, where and whence they move, and how their paths intersect with those of other humans.

If it is our concern to thematize humanity within a cognitive horizon and thus produce some knowledge about mankind that, though its form of scientific procedure, fulfils certain basic cultural criteria of plausibility (Wissenschaftlichkeit) – which is indispensable for the culture of modern societies – then we are confronted with the fundamental problem of cultural orientation: the integration of the entire accumulated stock of knowledge into a coherent form which would correspond to an “idea of mankind” capable of informing all our activities.

These days the question of what it means to be human poses itself as part of the unbroken continuity of self-problematization mankind has been undergoing with regard to its cultural status, and also within the context of new challenges. Among these can be counted the provocations issued by new insights on the part of the natural sciences. Those have extended and deepened the disposal of man over his own nature tight down to interfering with his genetic equipment as well as making the processes of his mental activities visible, and thereby rendering them capable of manipulation. Another challenge is issued by the conflictual potential resulting from intercultural interaction through the process of globalization: here ideas of mankind are competing – and quite often – clashing with one another. Such conflicts can go so far as to annihilate the other side in order to force upon it one’s own idea of humanity. The sciences – if they want to or not – are involved in this clash. They can either supply it with intellectual weaponry, or they can also enter the fight in their own specific way, i.e. with the intention of reflecting upon its causes and showing up ways of its peaceful resolution. What is to be done within the continuity of our cultural enquiry into what fundamentally constitutes the humanity of human beings in the face of these challenges from the natural sciences? First of all it is important to investigate the humanity of mankind from the multiple perspectives opened up by a variety of disciplines, but also from that of the diversity of cultural traditions, in order to come to cognitive grips with humanity. The demand for the totality of cultural orientation is thereby confronted with the multi-perspectivism of scientific research and – in a completely different dimension – diverse cultural traditions (which can also influence the scientific disciplines). The first move away from this irritating plurality of perspectives to the concept of total meaning consists in acknowledging perspectivism as such. This realization and acceptance of the
ineluctable persepctivism of all scientific knowledge is the first step towards a higher coherence of meaning. Because in accepting this, the limits of particular insights are made visible and – in doing so – already transgressed in the direction of other disciplines and their respective forms of cognition.

Knowledge alone is incapable of fulfilling the need for orientation required by the mental effort of producing meaning. What is also needed for such an orientation are norms and values and meaningful symbols (such as those provided by art) that go beyond the rational reach of the sciences. If one want to raise modern culture (and it has to be raised because it is of vital importance), then one also questions the ability of scientific knowledge to be connected and mediated with other achievements human anatomy, and whether it can be integrated into the horizon of cultural self-definition.

The following texts are attempting to supply an answer to the question after the humanity of human beings that take both aspects into consideration: the multiplicity of perspectives from which man has to be studies, and in an equal measure the aspects under which one can attempt to integrate this plurality into a whole. One should not expect more than just a sketchy outline of the entire field of human self-thematization because the gaps in the argumentative context of various disciplines and traditions are only too obvious. For instance there are no contributions on religion or economics, and philosophy is only referred to somewhat obliquely. Also the cultural diversity of such powerful traditions in the need for orientation that the process of globalization and the effect of technological-scientific civilization upon people’s lives have given rise to could only be addressed by way of example.

In spite of the sketchiness and temporariness of the arguments presented here there are some more comprehensive themes emerging that are capable of lending the intercultural debate on the future perspectives of cultural science-making about man and his world a specific profile. It appears that the new challenges so forcefully issued to human self-understanding by globalization demand a response whereby the different traditions ascribing an intrinsic value to human beings can be summarized under the heading of new humanism.

The essential features of this kind of humanism are evident: it is grounded upon anthropological universals; it integrates new insights into human nature as the basis for mankind’s cultural achievements; it develops cross-cultural perspectives on historical development; finally it opens up human self-understanding to the multifariousness and changeability of the cultural life forms mankind has evolved.

In the first part of the volume the anthropological, neuro-biological and evolutionary aspects are presented that form our idea of being human at the interface of three research-paradigms – biology, ethnology and sociology.

Biology comes first. The concept of ‘humanity’ and most all of ‘humanness’
designate a human quality that mark man as a cultural being, which serves all his
ties with natural conditioning factors. Nonetheless man as a cultural being also
remains part of nature. The interdependence of both, nature and culture, their
synthesis through the humanity of humans, is a fact, but fully grasping this fact
meets with great difficulties. These are principally caused that nature is the
object of a branch of science which, for methodological reasons, is not con-
cerned with the question of meaning that is so relevant for the humanities. How
can such a way of thinking possibly comprehend the nature of man that is
constantly being converted into culture if exactly that aspect of nature is not
mentioned at all which defines culture? Conversely, those branches of science
that occupy themselves with culture are, for epistemological reasons, incapable
of systematically transcending the horizon of mankind’s cultural dimension
towards its natural qualities. This would, indeed, be beyond the scope of the
cultural sciences.

This tension also manifests itself in the current discourse about human nature
and its influence on determining man’s cultural life practices. Recent insights
into the genetic equipment of man and the genetic structure as well as function of
his brain have led scientists to assume that mankind’s cultural aspirations are
determined by nature. This went so far that some of the key-terms of man’s
cultural self-reflection, such as freedom, have had their cognitive relevance
abrogated. There is of course no doubt about the conditioning of human life by
the natural equipment he has come endowed with as a member of the species of
_homo sapiens_, but the extent of this conditioning is still a matter of controversy.

The essay by _Gerald Hüther_ shows in an impressive manner that it would be
rather more appropriate to speak of the cultural conditioning of natural proc-
esses in the brain than conversely to regard the cultural activities initiated by the
brain as being conditioned by nature. It is culture, the social context into which
human beings have been born, in which they grow up and spend their lives that
largely determine the formation and structure of the brain. In Hüther’s argu-
ment the entity ‘brain’ is not conceived as an object among other objects, but in
terms of its quality and in specific contribution to organizing human life it
stands revealed as an essentially social phenomenon. Only within a social
context does the brain evolve into the natural locus of what constitutes human
life.

From the perspective of brain research being human is a life-long process of
becoming human. Through this insight the category of education acquires a new
degree of plausibility. With such research findings anthropological study comes
close to a synthesis of body and mind, nature and nurture, which has to be taken
into account and explained more than ever. Due to the insights provided by brain
research, nature as a category external to man and something he has to come to
term with, especially in views of today’s urgent environmental problems, in
order to safeguard his humanity is thereby shifted into man himself. This is exactly where a new understanding of man’s relationship with nature becomes visible which one could apply to the ecological problems of securing the survival of the species.

Any attempt at determining the humanity of human beings in such a way that transcultural features we all have in common are to serve as the basis for intercultural understanding meets with massive objections. These are grounded on the undeniable fact that there exist fundamental cultural differences which are not just empirically obvious, but which are also deeply embedded within the mental processes of every human being and which serve as a specific quality by means of which it distinguished itself from other people, whether as an individual, whether as the member of a larger community. Nevertheless, anthropological universals might be drawn upon in order to render more plausible the attempt to use a universalizing idea of mankind for resolving the current problems arising from globalization. Christoph Antweiler is supplying strong arguments in support of this view. His argument runs counter to the tendency to make cultural difference into the paramount aspect of intercultural communication, as a result of which anthropological universals (if they are perceived and recognized at all) on the one hand, and the particularity and difference of concrete human life styles (‘cultures’) on the other are played off against each other as supposedly unbridgeable opposites. Only if universals and differences can thought of in terms of their complementarity, when they are thought ‘into one another’, as it were, is it possible to gain a proper perspective on mankind that is both empirically enriched and normatively promising by way of serving as a point of reference for cultural orientation. Antweiler emphasizes the complexity of difference and similarity, thereby not denying the power of difference while at the same time integrating it into a referential system of transcultural communality among humans.

Georg Oesterdiekhoff’s contribution fulfils a similar function in the way of supplying a foundational system for understanding human beings in the multifariousness of their life forms. In doing so he focuses on one capacity for dealing with the world. Taking as his starting point the insights of developmental psychology such as they have been evolved by Jean Piaget and others he develops a theory of cultural evolution whereby our understanding of what it means to be human is placed within the context of the universal unfolding of our cognitive capacity. In doing so he generalizes the insights of modern developmental psychology through widening its scope to such an extent that it can serve as the universal history of the way in which our human life forms have evolved. Thus the variety of human life forms can be categorized by subsuming them under the different stages of our cognitive development, and as such they can be understood as stages within a structured genetical process. The notion of such a
developmental process refers back to the old enlightenment trope of progress as the on-going change mankind is made to undergo in the course of history, while additionally supporting it by supplying a lot of empirical data. Universal history is thereby conceived as a continuous process of ‘humanizing humankind’ with our current understanding of humanity, i.e. the abstract norms of universal ethics, serving as the standard.

Oesterdiekhoff’s main argument, i.e. of distinguishing between premodern and modern life forms and using this distinction by way of proving the evidence of social evolution, would have to be historicized much more extensively in order to be able to analyze more closely the differences between various historical epochs and, of course also between cultures and civilizations.

In the second part of the book, as opposed to the transcultural, generalizing and fundamental concerns of the first part, the focus will be on cultural difference by drawing on the example of some selected large civilizations. This is all about confronting Western civilization with non-Western cultural developments which can justifiably be regarded as contributions to the understanding of humanity or humanness.

*Hubert Cancik* gives a survey of Western humanism. He makes it clear that humanism in all its varieties cannot be understood without taking into consideration its roots in classical antiquity, especially by the Greek and Roman one. He elaborates on the special and temporal dimensions of Western humanism while emphasizing the special role played by education in the process of forming the humanity of humans (or more precisely, for the becoming human of mankind both onto- and phylogenetically). However, Western humanism is not just reduced to some basic assumptions as a result of which these assume the quality of an invariable historical phenomenon. Such sweeping characterizations are nothing but generalizations compared to the multiple and differentiated manifestations. In this regard it is not only regional but also epochal differences that play an important role. Admittedly, the central concepts of humanist thinking have been evolved in Roman antiquity and has remained an important point of reference for this kind of thought right up to the threshold of Modernity; however, as an identifiable intellectual movement, as a discourse delimiting itself from other intellectual discourses it did not come into existence until the early Modern Age. In Modernity it finally acquires not only its name but also its own people, and at the same the dynamism inherent in its divergencies and tension.

In his contribution on Confucianism *Heiner Roetz* indicates the possibility of historically locating and making plausible a genuinely non-Western humanism. This has systematic implications for the current treatment on the topic of humanism far exceeding the isolated case of China. Although the term bears a Western imprint, but when one considers the essential elements of this concept with regard to the relationship of man with himself (as man) the whole issue
attains a universal dimension: Culturally different concepts of humanity can be examined and critically compared with each other. Roetz develops Chinese humanism within the context of the specific historical situation that gave rise to Confucianism and its varieties. However, he is not so much concerned with historically distinguishing it from the Western tradition (as is frequently the case with Chinese authors who maintain a critical stance vis-à-vis the West). On the contrary, for him Chinese humanism with its historical particulars is nothing but a variety of human thought that came into existence with the epochal rupture of axial time in diverse cultures. Little though the specifically Chinese character of Confucianism can be denied, it is on the other hand relevant to point up those of its features that it has in common with other versions of human thought, especially as regards its universalizing tendencies. It is this very universalism which lends Chinese humanism its intercultural relevance, however, only without its nationalist overtone whereby it gets instrumentalized as the cultural means of securing political power. Roetz is positioning himself in the current confrontation of the Confucian with the Western tradition often to be found among East Asian intellectuals. He does not do this just with regard to human rights, but he also introduces bioethical aspects into a debate in which normative claims connected with the Western concepts of human dignity are often refuted. Without playing off Western arguments against East Asian ones he shows that the Confucian tradition can be interpreted in a different way that is compatible with Western arguments. In doing so he implicitly introduces a humanist dimension into the intercultural controversy over different varieties of humanist thought.

Umesh Chattopadhyaya presents Indian humanism in view of its long historical development from the classical texts of the Vedanta via the critical debate with Western culture up to the concept of a new humanism. Against the background of a long tradition with a strong religious bias Indian humanism is marked by its attempt to conclusively connect the essential elements of this tradition with those aspects that systematically take into account the historical specificity of Modernity. In this respect Indian humanism indeed distinguishes itself from the Western and other varieties of humanist thought, but at the same time this distinctiveness acknowledges the fact that what had been distinguished was not outright rejected or limited off but integrated and adapted. Especially with regard to India the traditional distinction made in the discourse on Hinduism are thus becoming obfuscated: secular and religious elements no longer appear as strict opposites but appear in different constellations. In an intercultural perspective this raises the question if our traditional understanding of religion is at all adequate for interpreting (Western) humanism when it comes to growing awareness of the immanent and transcendent dimensions in several versions of humanism (not only the Western variety) and being able to appre-
ciate the relevance of their mediation in an idea of humanity. Something similar applies to the clear-cut distinction between Western and non-Western aspects of humanist thought. Can the political humanism of Mahatma Ghandi or the poetical one of Rabindranath Tagore at all be understood in terms of such a difference? Especially with regard to Indian culture interculturality can be defined as one of those intellectual operations whereby opposites are not just removed, but where non-oppositional thinking becomes viable. In the context of the question whether an inclusive humanism is at all possible India therefore acquires not only an historical degree of relevance but also in systematic-theoretical terms. My own contribution is the attempt to delineate the development of the concept of being human and humanity, and to show how it culminates in the rise of modern humanism. In doing so I am guided by a theoretical intention. The historical particularity of humanism, such as it manifested itself as the humanist concept of the European Modern Age, is to be placed within the general context of the philosophy of history, which will make it interculturally relevant.

The argument is based on an outline of the various periods as defined by the philosophy of history, which relies on the concept of axial time. This concept makes it possible to combine cultural variety with a universal history common to all, which would – beating in mind the notion of Modernity as a ‘second axial time’ – secure for the present historical scheme of things as regards the idea of humanity and humanism. This historical reconstruction results in a problematic whereby the current thinking about mankind in an intercultural perspective is faced with the task of being renewed in conceptual terms: the various and usually exclusive idea, regarding mankind so far evolved in different cultural traditions have to be reinterpreted and developed further on the basis of their inclusive features because these can be regarded as the highest form of any internal universalism. Through this manoeuvre the temporal distancing that the historicizing of the category of humanity and humanism inevitably entails is capable of paving the way for a future perspective, which makes historiography into an indispensable partner in the current discourse about the humanity of humans.

Oliver Kozlarek expounds the Latin American variety of humanist thought by referring to its most distinguished exponents. It is composed of a peculiar combination of Western and indigenous tradition or ways of thinking. In Latin America, and Kozlarek does not leave this in any kind of doubt, Western thought can be perceived itself in the mirror of critique in which its dark sides stand out much more clearly than in its usual historical self-perception that totally excluded non-Western humanism on trial before the court of ideological critique, but by pointing up its limitations its potential for further development is also indicated. Its alienation from itself by being absorbed into colonial forms of life.
can therefore be seen as a chance for its enrichment, which can also be made productive for the intercultural debate on a new humanism.

The third part is concerned with making the philosophizing about mankind, together with its humanist aspirations, applicable to present-day problems, i.e. relating concepts of humanity, within the context of Modernity, to those problems of orientation caused by the process of globalization. Of course not all the issues within this context can be addressed, but in an exemplary way questions will be raised concerning economic distributional justice, gender-relations and the attendant overcoming of inequality, as well as the psychological dimensions in which humanity can articulate itself in the context of Modernity. In conclusion we shall ponder the chances of an intercultural humanism for the future.

In his article Günter Dux combines insights from the fields of cognitive theory, the idea of history as well as sociology and the theory of history. His argument takes its point of departure the current problems of orientation resulting from the threat to long-established humane life forms posed by the development of market-economy (capitalism). Modern thought, which revolves around man as the source, the end and the be-all of his orientation in the world, is positioned within the comprehensive framework of the evolution of mankind’s cultural self-definition, and this in turn is made understandable by resorting to the decisive cognitive move of relating it to the cognitive achievements of the natural sciences. On the basis of these no orientational norms whatsoever can be proclaimed that would be grounded upon, as it were, meta-anthropological presuppositions. Humanity is the fundamental category of a ‘recursive’ definition of mankind. Cognitively enabled by nature, man constructs his own world and makes himself, so to speak, at home in it. This process of accommodation occurs over a long historical process of development also definable as evolution, which sits athwart the development of cultural difference. Dux sets out the logic of this evolution as the unfolding of cognitive competence inherent in all human action.

This humanity, from a theoretical perspective enriched with empirical data is described as an historical process. This finally leads to certain human life practices that we today perceive as being specifically humanist. According to Dux, humanism can be defined as the self-determined relationship man establishes with himself. This relationship gets, through the dominance of market economy, into an inner contradiction between the economic production of material riches and the political demand for human self-determination. The potential inclusion of all individuals, due to their being human, in life forms that are considered to be humane by all concerned is fundamentally put in question by distribution of wealth produced in a capitalist system. From this insight Dux derives political strategies for a humanization that remains loyal to the standards of humanity achieved in the course of universal history.
In Ilse Lenz’ contribution the fundamental fact that being human is principally and always and everywhere conceived in terms of gender occupies center stage of her argument. For a long time (and occasionally still today) mention has been made of ‘man as such’, thereby completely leaving the gender-specific aspects of being human out of the picture. This resulted in viewing human beings first and foremost as a generalized male being, as a result of which the human potential of being female has been totally marginalized. In a detailed overview of modern feminist movements and the political and academic discourses associated with these, a vast and highly complex vista of being human is opened up in which inequality and difference become visible both as a danger to, as well as a chance for, humanity.

The dangers – in the form of a structural imbalance in the relation between the genders along with serious discrimination – are evident and still virulent. At the same time, however, the sociological perspective in the global dimension of gender inequality among humans alters us to the experience of a fundamental change that is occurring world-wide. It is definitely moving in the direction of doing away with this imbalance.

Within the context of an unconditional recognition of cultural difference transcultural phenomena like gender inequality as the source of conflict and violence are easily lost sight of or are at least played down in their importance from a culturally relativist point of view. That is the reason why Ilse Lenz expressly comes out in favor of not subsuming social difference, along with its central feature of gender difference, under cultural difference, thereby permitting the culturalist legitimization of evident inhumanity. At the same time she pleads in favor of a hermeneutical sensitivity in dealing with gender-determined life forms and their changes. In this regard Lenz develops the concept of a ‘reflective universalism’ that systematically takes cognizance of ‘cultural difference’, while at the same time adhering to transcultural experiences and perspectives in terms of their interpretation (along with the practical strategies allied with these).

With the concept of personal identity Jürgen Straub analyzes one of the principal notions for understanding human beings within the context of modern societies. The psychological phenomena coming within the purview of this concept for him amount to a specific configuration of those mental forces that constitute human subjectivity and make it into a project for those involved that they have to cope with on an individual basis. Thereby he introduces a differentiation that is relevant for the historical analysis of humanism: No longer can there be any talk of an essentializing anthropological definition of mankind without referring to or even subverting the specific discourse in which it was first formulated. Straub reconstructs the historically specific situation of human beings in the context of the living conditions in the age of Modernity and sys-
tematically characterizes the complex psychological make-up of human subjectivity corresponding to this situation. In this manner he analyzes a type of human behavior that is specific of our epoch and that has to become the object of all our remedial efforts in creating a sustainable humanism by way of providing a cultural orientation in the current of process of globalization. As opposed to traditional historicism and its different variations Straub explicitly emphasizes the high level of complexity of subjectivity in the modern world (without being oblivious of this cultural type’s confinement to certain areas in an inter- as well as intracultural comparison). Especially the fragility, fragmentariness, openness, inner dynamic and the high degree of self-reflectiveness that the permanent awareness of a precarious relation with alterity involves render this type into a highly attractive option. Any attempt at rethinking humanism as a cultural compass for a new and viable orientation of human practices in the face of the modern challenges of globalization would be well advised to consider this approach.

The conclusion of this volume is formed by the essay of Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer. The intercultural perspective of this contribution is influenced by the topical problems of the situation in our world and therefore focuses on the difficulties of orientation attendant upon the process of globalization. At the same time reference to this presence is complemented and completed with numerous digressions into the past with its historical dimension. The first one of these revolves around the question of the historical preconditions. Schmidt-Glintzer explicitly inquires the opportunities and limitations of a new humanism (a question informing the concept of this entire volume). This humanism does not do away with the vital distinction between the self and the other. On the contrary, it rests upon the fundamental recognition of cultural difference and multifariousness. But this multitude of differences is circumscribed by the notion of a universal humanity that can assume different shapes. All endeavors to realize humanity must aim at unlocking this potential through a successful process of education. The forces running counter to such an education are addressed and differentiated by Schmidt-Glintzer so that his plea for a new humanism is counterbalanced by a realistic appraisal of mankind’s potential for humanity, thus arming us against possible disappointments. This works all the more in favor of those arguments that positively assess the chances of working towards a new and viable intercultural humanism.
I. Foundations
By far the most significant finding in the field of neurobiological research in recent years is what we refer to today as experience-dependent or use-dependent plasticity: It is the discovery that the neuronal and synaptic connections in the human brain can be altered. The complexity of these connections and their stabilization depend to a far greater extent than previously believed on how – or rather, for which purpose – an individual uses his brain, the goals pursued, the experiences made in the course of his life, the models used for orientation, the factors which provide emotional stability and a sense of commitment. All this is shaped by an individual’s family relationships, the abilities passed on to him and the guiding ideals and the goals conveyed by the thoughts and aims, by the myths, legends and belief systems of the particular culture in which a person grows up. The neuronal connectivity patterns in the human brain are continuously adjusted to these social and cultural factors, at least in all those areas which are shaped and structured postnatally. In other words, the individual human brain in its mature state is a social construct.

Therefore, it is not astonishing that neuroscientists by their modern imaging techniques are able to identify numerous differences between the brains of differently encultured and socialized subjects at both, the structural and the functional level. These differences are most pronounced in the very slowly developing higher cortical association areas. Examples of such use dependent adaptive modifications and reorganizations of neuronal connectivity have been observed throughout lifetime, even in the brains of elderly subjects. The degree of brain plasticity is of course highest at younger ages, but the networks and connections between nerve cells can apparently be restructured and adjusted to new demands throughout lifetime. A prerequisite for such experience-dependent changes is the activation of the emotional centers (limbic system). This leads to the release of trophic, hormone-like substances, which stimulate the growth and the reorganization of nerve cell contacts and connections. Such
emotional activation, i.e. situations which “go deeply under the skin”, are most often experimented during childhood and adolescence, but much less frequently during adulthood, when a person has learned to master almost all challenges of daily life routinely.

The most important triggers for the adaptive modification and reorganization of neuronal networks and synaptic circuitry at any age are the problems encountered and the experiences made by an individual in the course of the so called stress-response. Therefore, the first part of this contribution will focus on the adaptive self-organization of neuronal connectivity through the mastery of challenges and of stressful experiences. In the second part, the influences of early affective relationships and of a culture of peace and non-violence on the developing brain will be somewhat more closely examined.

2. Stress and the Experience-dependent Organization of Neuronal Connectivity

Current stress research is characterized by fascinating insights into the mechanisms involved in the activation and the regulation of the neuroendocrine stress response and the consequences of this activation on the body and the brain. This progress is contrasted by a considerable degree of conceptual confusion. Until now, a generally accepted concept of stress is still elusive. Initially the term “stress” was used synonymous to “stressor” and no clear distinction was made between this stimulus and the reaction to it, the “stress-response”. This concept has now been replaced by the recognition that stimulus and response cannot be regarded as two independent, stable entities but rather represent two closely linked components mutually affecting each other in the course of the stress-reaction-process. This conceptualization explicitly implies important aspects, such as the character of the strain, the appraisal and the psychological as well as the emotional changes which occur in the course of this process. It implies that, if an individual is able to terminate a certain stressor by his own efforts, a controllable stress response is elicited, whereas an uncontrollable stress response is initiated when no adequate coping strategies are available or can be applied to terminate the stressor.

A controllable stress response is typically elicited when an individual has the subjective feeling that a certain demand or challenge can be met in principle by its own action but when this action is not (yet) ready, efficient or adequate enough to avoid the activation of his central stress responsive systems. The initial stages of the controllable and the uncontrollable stress response are identical. Both start with the recognition of a novel, unexpected, challenging or
threatening stimulus which causes the generation of a nonspecific pattern of arousal in the associative cortex and in the limbic structures. Through descending excitatory efferences, this activation is propagated to lower brain structures, especially to the central noradrenergic system. If the stressor is felt to be uncontrollable, the arousal of the higher cortical and limbic brain structures will not only persist but is even potentiated by the increased firing of noradrenergic afferences. Above a certain threshold, the sum of excitatory cortical and limbic, as well as of noradrenergic inputs to the neurosecretory hypothalamic nuclei will ultimately stimulate the release of corticotropin releasing hormone and vasopressin, and thus, activate the HPA-system and stimulate adrenal glucocorticoid secretion. However, if the stressor is felt to be controllable, the nonspecific pattern of arousal in the associative cortex will be funnelled into a specific activation of those neuronal pathways and circuits which are involved in the behavioral response to that stressor. Under these conditions, the enhanced noradrenergic output acts to facilitate the neuronal pathways activated in the course of this response. The reverberatory stimulation of the central stress responsive systems is no longer propagated, and the HPA-system is not at all or only slightly stimulated. Therefore, the controllable stress response may be regarded as an incompletely built up activation of the central stress responsive systems. It is characterized by a preferential activation of the central and the peripheral noradrenergic system.

Due to its extensive projections and the fact that adrenergic receptors are expressed not only by neurons but also by glial and endothelial cells, the central noradrenergic system is capable of modulating a great number of different brain functions:

Stimulation of neuronal adrenoreceptors increases the signal-to-noise ratio of cortical information processing, and contributes to the gating and to the facilitation of neuronal output patterns. Stimulation of adrenergic receptors of cerebral blood vessels leads to enhanced perfusion, increased brain glucose uptake and elevated energy metabolism. Activation of astrocytic adrenoreceptors stimulates glycogenolysis and the release of glucose and lactate as well as the formation and the release of various neurotrophic factors. Through these different effects, the increased noradrenergic output in the course of a controllable stress response contributes to the stabilization and facilitation of those neuronal pathways and connections which are activated in response to a certain controllable stressor. Repeated exposure to one and the same controllable stressor will thus lead to the successive facilitation of the neuronal circuitry involved in the behavioral responding. The noradrenaline-mediated stimulation of the synthesis and the release of neurotrophic factors by astrocytes will additionally favor structural adaptations through experience-dependent plasticity. Such stepwise adaptive modifications of the neuronal circuitry will automati-
cally be triggered in the course of the controllable stress response until the original stressor can be adequately met by an efficient response. To some extent, this adaptive modification of associative cortical networks is comparable to catecholamine-mediated, peripheral structural adaptation processes, such as the increase of fur density in mammals upon repeated exposure to cold.

The particular importance of the repeated activation of noradrenergic neurons in the course of the response to controllable stress for central adaptation processes is further supported by the fact that specific mechanisms evolved in mammals which increase the output efficacy of the noradrenergic system in the course of future stress responses in individuals exposed to different kinds of controllable stressors. This up-regulation of noradrenergic activity upon exposure to different controllable stressors is seen at several levels: The firing rate of noradrenergic neurons increases, the synthesis, storage, and release of noradrenaline by noradrenergic nerve endings rises, and even axonal sprouting and intensification of noradrenergic innervation in certain brain areas, e.g. in the cortex, have been observed.

Evidently, controllable stress of very complex and diverse character is a prerequisite for the optimal expression of the individual’s genetic potential and for the elaboration of a very complex neuronal circuitry in the brain. An impressive illustration of the complex and persistent effects of multiple experiences of many different controllable stress responses on brain structure and brain function are the influences of “enriched environments” on the development of the cortex of young experimental animals. Enriched environments provide many different stimuli which are novel and which can be explored. Rats which had grown up under such complex stimulatory environments show a thicker cortex, enhanced vascularization, elevated number of glial cells, enlarged dendritic trees of pyramidal neurons, and an increased density of synapses in the cortex. Additionally, in adulthood, they show diminished anxiety in novel environments and an increased response of their HPA-system under conditions of severe stress.

An uncontrollable stress response is elicited when the activation of the central stress sensitive systems cannot be terminated by an individual’s own efforts, because his previously acquired strategies of appraisal and coping are not appropriate or cannot be employed. Under such conditions, the initial arousal of cortical and limbic structures will persist and contribute to escalate the reverberatory activation of the central stress responsive systems culminating in the activation of the HPA-system and adrenal glucocorticoid secretion. Because of their lipophilicity, circulating glucocorticoids can easily enter the brain and bind to the glucocorticoid receptors expressed by neurons and glial cells. As in the periphery, it is their main function to attenuate the activation of immediate stress responsive systems and to prevent these initial reactions from over-
shooting. However, glucocorticoids do not directly suppress the immediate central responses in the course of the stress response, e.g., the release of excitatory amino acids or of monoamines. Instead, most actions of glucocorticoids in the brain are delayed and involve changes at the level of gene expression. These alterations have longer-lasting consequences on neuronal and glial cell function and metabolism. Certain functions will be affected in a way such that the targets of the immediate stress response are better protected against the potential damage caused by an overshooting future activation. This is achieved at several different levels: through the suppression of c-AMP formation in response to adrenergic stimulation, through compromising cerebral energy mobilization or through the reduced formation of neurotrophic factors, growth of processes and synaptogenesis. Glucocorticoids have been shown to potentiate the glutamate-induced damage to neurons and their dendrites and are therefore able to interrupt the neuronal circuits involved in the initiation and propagation of the central stress response. The hippocampal pyramidal neurons are endowed with the highest density of glucocorticoid receptors and are therefore especially vulnerable to long-lasting elevations of circulating glucocorticoids caused by the uncontrollable stress. Also the noradrenergic axons and nerve terminals in the cortex appear to be particularly susceptible under such conditions and tend to retract and to degenerate. At the behavioral level, high concentrations of circulating glucocorticoids have been shown to facilitate the extinction of previously acquired reactions. The common feature of all these different effects caused by the activation of the HPA-system in the course of the uncontrollable stress response is their destabilizing influence on the previously established neuronal connectivity. The facilitation and stabilization of neuronal circuitry triggered in the course of previous controllable stress response is thus opposed, attenuated or even reversed in the course of an long-lasting uncontrollable stress. The destabilization of the previously established neuronal connectivity in cortical and limbic brain structures may lead to fundamental changes in cognition, emotion and behavior and, at least in the adult brain, may be a prerequisite for the acquisition of novel patterns of appraisal and coping and for the reorganization of the neuronal connectivity in cortical and limbic associative networks.

Throughout life, the repeated experience of the controllability of stressors is normally alternated by feelings of loss of control. The central adaptations resulting from the repeated exposure to controllable stressors are thus at least partly destabilized during periods when the loss of control is experienced. The activation of the central stress responsive systems by repeated experiences of controllable stress facilitates neuronal circuits and synaptic connections mainly through the activation of the central noradrenergic system. The neuroendocrine changes associated with the experience of uncontrollable stress, on the other
hand, favor synaptic regression and the destabilization of previously established synaptic pathways and neuronal circuits. As long as the activation of the central stress system can be terminated by a cognitive, emotional or behavioral reaction, the neuronal circuits involved in this response become facilitated. If no cognitive, emotional or behavioral responses are available to terminate the activation of the central stress response system, the underlying neuronal networks become destabilized. This may provide novel opportunities for the reorganization of neuronal circuits and the acquisition of novel coping strategies for a more efficient control of the novel environmental demands. But more often such destabilization processes pave the way into the manifestation of various kinds of psychopathologies.

The nature of what an individual considers life threatening, stressful challenges changes together with, and as a result of his improving sensory cognitive and intellectual realization of, and interaction with, the outside world. In infants, a stress response is initially only elicited in situations that demand the satisfaction of a basic need. Later, the central stress-responsive systems are most frequently activated by the recognition of certain social and cultural rules which prohibit the satisfaction of such a need. In the course of their socialization, individuals develop additional needs which are no longer basic but culturally acquired. The strategies which are chosen by an individual to meet each one of these challenges are strictly dependent on his previous experiences. “Successful” behavioral strategies, i. e. the neuronal networks involved in the activation and execution of certain cognitive, emotional or behavioral reactions which make a certain type of stressor subjectively controllable, become increasingly reinforced and facilitated. Inadequate strategies which repeatedly fail to suppress and to silence the central stress responsive systems will either be eliminated or will become a constant source of dysregulation. By this self-optimization process, the cognitive, behavioral and emotional reactivity of an individual is fitted in a stepwise, trial-and-error manner to its changing environmental demands.

All newborns possess a certain repertoire of behavioral reactions which are activated in the course of, or together with, the activation of the central stress responsive systems when their homeostasis is threatened by cold, hunger, thirst etc. Thus, they all make the repeated early experience that their reactions are suited to terminate the central responses elicited by stressful experiences. This early recognition of the controllability of a stressor by an own action is one of the earliest associative learning experiences of a child and it has a strong imprinting impact on the developing brain. It is the prerequisite for the acquisition of an ever increasing repertoire of more and more specific and refined behavioral strategies for the control of stressors. This repeated experience of the controllability of stress is a prerequisite for the acquisition of behavioral strategies which
allow an individual to act and not simply to react. The more successful these actions are, the more will the neuronal pathways and synaptic connections involved in a certain type of adaptive behavior become strengthened and efficient coping skills for certain types of stressors be developed. The ability to deal successfully with stressors strengthens the self-esteem and feelings of self-efficacy as much as the range of problem-solving skills of an individual. Consequently, the experience of the controllability of stress is the predominating experience and the driving force for the later development of those individuals of a social group which, within the socio-cultural and age-specific context of this group, will become the most successful, the most clever, but not necessarily the most flexible and the most stable ones.

Such personal qualities emerge already at rather young ages. They can only be developed on the basis of secure stable affectional relationships during early childhood and favorable temperamental attributes. It is important, that stressful experiences are encountered at a time and in a way that allows the feeling of the controllability of stress to increase through appropriate responses. Reinforcing interactions with and responses from other people are important prerequisites for the promotion of self-confidence and self-esteem. A child’s ability to cope successfully with stress is therefore never due to the buffering effect of some supportive factor. Rather it is determined by the chain of sequential experiences made under the prevailing conditions of a given familial and socio-cultural context.

3. The Influence of Early Affectional Relationships on Brain Development and Behavior

Secure emotional relationships between the child and its caregivers are of uttermost importance for the integration of novel experiences into the already existing patterns of neuronal connectivity in the developing brain. When a new stimulus reaches the brain, it will elicit a certain kind of arousal in the associative networks. If this arousal pattern is identical with the pattern of arousal formed by the activation of already established neuronal connections (founded by earlier experiences), the new stimulus will be reorganized as already known and responded as usual, i.e., routinely. If the novel arousal pattern is at least a bit similar to the already existing patterns formed by earlier experiences, it may be integrated into these old patterns and will thus become stabilized as an extended, more complex pattern of neuronal activity. This is the way, how children (and adults) learn. If this integration is impossible, because the novel arousal pattern is too strange and cannot be associated with any already existing pattern, the
child may either neglect the challenge or – if the stimulus or the problem is large enough and does not disappear – activate an emergency reaction. All mammals process such very old, genetically programmed emergency reactions: fight, flight – and if neither the activation of one or the other does solve the problem – freezing. The latter is associated with a so-called uncontrollable stress response, which causes a massive and long-lasting release of stress hormones which may cause destabilization of already existing neuronal connections and hamper the formation of new ones. Under such condition of helplessness, nothing can be learned and already stored knowledge cannot be activated and the respective neuronal connectivity patterns may even get lost permanently.

Secure emotional relationships provide the most potent protection against such overload and its consequences on the brain. They act to resilience the stress-system under conditions of massive arousal by too strange experiences or too strong stimulation. In the other extreme, when the novel stimulus is not very strong, secure emotional relationships act as “emotional enhancers of arousal”. The child is thus encouraged and motivated in its attempts to realize and integrate a novel (otherwise too weak) stimulus. If such support by secure attachment relationships are not available to a child, it is easily either flooded by an overload of stimuli (no stable activation patterns can then be formed and integrated in the brain structures) or it is insufficiently aroused (and therefore no sufficiently strong activation patterns are build up and can be integrated in the brain). Therefore, the quality of the relationship to its caregivers my either favor or hamper the acquisition of own knowledge and competence by the child and affect the complexity of the structural maturation of its brain in a beneficial or detrimental manner.

It is during the first three years of life when the vast majority of synapses is produced. The number of synapses increases with astonishing rapidity until about the age three years and then holds steady throughout the first decade of life. A child’s brain becomes super-dense, with twice as many synapses as it will eventually need. Brain development is, then, a process of pruning, i.e. use-dependent structuring. This is why early experience is so crucial: those neuronal networks and synaptic pathways that have been stabilized by virtue of repeated early experience tend to become permanent; the synapses that are not used often enough tend to be eliminated. In this way early experiences – positive or negative – have a decisive impact on how the brain is wired.

Compared to other primates, the maturation of the human brain, especially of the higher frontocortical brain regions is enormously prolonged in our species. It reaches a much higher degree of complexity and is much more affected by early experiences, by use- and disuse-dependent plasticity. The most delicate neuronal networks of the frontal cortex are the sites where the most complex, most sophisticated and the most human-specific brain functions will be gen-