Chapter 10

Reasons for Living

Anders Kølle

Scientific Conception of the Origin of Life

How did life on earth emerge? What are the components and events that can explain the origin of life in all its complexity and great diversity? This most fundamental question has for many centuries been the subject of scientific as well as philosophic inquiries and given rise to many divergent theories. One theory which proved particularly resilient and attracted the interest of scientists well into the 19th century was the theory on spontaneous generation. According to the doctrine of spontaneous generation, the emergence of life did not necessarily depend on a causal agent – no seed, eggs, or parents were necessary as sources or origins – but life emerged instead from inorganic matter: Non-life gave rise to life. Thus fleas could arise from dust or maggots from dead flesh. In the European Renaissance, the Belgian chemist Jan Baptist van Helmont (1580-1644) offered a detailed description of how mice could emerge from a combination of dirty garments and wheat within 21 days. Other theories and scientists provided recipes for the creation of insects such as butterflies and bees. Given the right circumstances, life would emerge by itself – spontaneously and without a fixed and identifiable cause. Life was, in other words, the result of chance rather than plan.

This accidental conception of the origin of life has both its philosophical predecessors as well as its modern scientific heirs. Pre-Aristotelian philosophers such as Xenophanes, Anaximander, and Empedocles thought that the origin of life could be traced back to the four elements: water, air, earth, and fire. Thus a mixture of earth and water receiving heat from the sun would create the basis of life, according to Anaximander. He called this combination of elements the “primordial terrestrial slime” and speculated that it was able to produce animals, plants, and humans directly.

In natural sciences Anaximander´s conception finds its modern equivalent in the thinking and theories of Charles Darwin. Darwin who ceaselessly sought a biological explanation for life and who gathered his discoveries and theories in the seminal work *The Origin of Species* (1859) offered his own version of the Greek conception and named it “the primordial soup”. Unlike his theory of evolution which he considered to be scientifically proved, Darwin´s theories on the origin of life itself remained in his own words a pure speculation: Perhaps life originated from a hot, little pond in which ammoniac, phosphorus salts, light, and electricity were able to generate a protein, which would soon undergo a further development. Perhaps all of today´s rich and diverse life forms could be traced back to the simplest of ingredients and a few basic building blocks.
In the 1950s the two molecular biologists and geneticists James Watson and Francis Crick discovered the structure of the nucleic acid, DNA, which functions as the very recipe or blueprint of life for every single, living organism and is contained in every living cell. Although the genetic code itself was yet to be deciphered and exhaustively described, the two scientists had by their discovery already opened the doors for an understanding of the molecule that enabled the production and reproduction of organisms – the fundamental building blocks of life appeared to have been found. From the study of DNA and its particular organization it was now possible to understand life as the result of a genetic code containing the information by which life itself is formed: the endless replication of molecules and the ceaseless reproduction of organisms. The work of James Watson and Francis Crick thus presented and explained life in terms that were anything but spontaneous or accidental: Every riddle was to be solved by the precise structure of DNA which served as the necessary bearer of exact information.

Despite the great scientific significance of James Watson’s and Francis Crick’s findings, the question of the origin of life was still not satisfactorily answered: Although DNA and genetic coding did appear to explain the underlying structures and necessary blueprints for organic life it still did not explain how these structures themselves arose? How did DNA emerge? Under what conditions? As the result of which influences, energies, forces, chemical structures and components? The question remains unanswered today. Although many scientists agree that the origin of life has to be sought in chemical processes and by following chemical traces leading us back to the beginning of Earth and its geological formation, the scientific riddle remains unsolved.

Origin, Value and Dignity of Human Life

In significant ways the question of the origin of life in general and of human life in particular is inseparable from the conception and interpretation of how dignity and value is to be understood. In fact it would be difficult to talk about “value” and “dignity” in the singular form given that changing historical periods, divergent epistemological perspectives, different cultures and societies, all comprise their own values and articulate their own ideals. Thus in ancient Greece the question of dignity was closely related to the successful fulfilment of a particular role: The shepherd had his dignity which was different from that of the soldier or the general. Dignity could therefore not be generalized but was dependent on a social function and the responsibilities that came with this function. This pluralization corresponded with a Greek worldview inhabited by multiple gods. In Greek mythology as in Greek society, each god and each man was assigned a specific task in the greater order of things, the cosmos. And thus not only the question of dignity but also of value was understood and set within this frame: What am I to do if I am to fare well? The value of a praxis, of an action was inseparable from one’s role – which again was firmly rooted in a cultural praxis and in a set of cultural beliefs. In other words: The Greek conception of life and the question of dignity and value were not separable but interdependent ideas delineating a purposefulness and constructing a belief system that would ideally serve as the basis for public as well as private life.
In European history the question of the origin of human life has been the cause of
great – at times bitter and violent – controversies. Especially one fault line has repeatedly caused
new irruptions and fragmentations: The divergent perspectives of the natural sciences and of
Christianity.

In modern history the scientific explanation of the origin of man is primarily the result
of the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin. In his grand theory of the origin of species, man is
but one link in a long chain of mutations, adaptions, and transformations whereby every species and
every life form seeks to improve its chances of survival on the constant and pitiless battle scene of
nature. Slight alterations in mechanisms of defense or in the physiognomy of the individual may
make the crucial difference between life and death, survival or annihilation. And since only
successful individuals will procreate in a world of perpetual striving and struggling over
nourishment, territory, and mating partners, only the most fortunate and favorably build individuals
will produce offspring – and thus pass their abilities on to a new generation. In Darwin´s scientific
regard and comprehensive vision, nature is a vast melting pot and grand laboratory of constant trial
and error where adaptability and survival are as inseparable as cause and effect. The Darwinian
credo “survival of the fittest” (which was, however, not formulated by Darwin but by the
philosopher Herbert Spencer) describes a world in which malleability is essential and all life forms
must be regarded as the result of billions of years of shaping and reshaping or of natural selection.
Although Darwin did not explicitly describe the process of human evolution in his first seminal
work On the Origin of Species, his theory was later to include the evolutionary history of man as
well. In The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex, Darwin emphatically precluded any
religious origin or explanation: As any other species, humans too were the result of nat
atural
selection. The gap separating man from animals was thereby closed and man taken off the pedestal
that had previously secured him a place above nature: All living organisms were part of the same,
great family and all life forms netted together and connected in multiple ways. Darwin´s “tree of
life” served precisely as an illustration of the relationships that ultimately connect all species to one
common ancestor and one single origin.

Inevitably Darwin´s theory of evolution inflicted a wound at the very center of man´s
self-perception. If the distance between man and animal has disappeared and man himself is indeed
an animal, then what happens to human dignity or to specifically human values? Do they still have a
place and a sense in an evolutionary worldview? A number of modern philosophers have regarded
this as a chance to reevaluate previous values and re-question earlier presumptions: The fluidity and
dynamicity that Darwin´s theory presents opens the possibility for an equally dynamic and vigorous
philosophy that regards man not as a fixed and predetermined being but as infinitely perfectible and
indefinitely shapeable: Man must become his own sculptor and his own work of art. Dignity and
values are no longer a human birth gift but what we ourselves must actively create. But a far more deterministic worldview was also extrapolated from Darwin´s theory: If man is part
of nature and nature is perpetual struggle for survival then human existence is already and
inescapably framed by the battle of life: Only the fittest will survive – the rest will perish. If this is
the simple but crucial teaching and law of nature then humans should not seek to counter or break
this law by protecting and helping society´s less fortunate and seemingly less viable but, instead,
give free rein to the forces and selective processes of nature. Under the name of social Darwinism this conception thus developed into a sociological teaching and a political ideal: Instead of inhibiting the free expression and natural instincts and inclinations of the individual and instead of regulating and restricting the forces of industrial capitalism and of the free market, society should repeat and respect the laws of nature: Only where there is striving and battle will there also be self-improvement, only where success is truly rewarded and defeat is genuinely punished will the quantity as well as quality of human productivity continuously increase. Social Darwinism thus sought to dispense of all particularly human values in order to make nature the grand teacher of life. And, as we may add, turned thereby nature itself into a new value in the midst of the very devaluation of values.

If the question of human origin thus proved inseparable from questions of values and of human worth, then the biological perspective offered by Darwin would inevitably conflict with the religious perspective offered by Christianity on several levels: What Darwin challenged with his tree of life, could not be limited to man´s relationship to nature and leave culture, tradition, and beliefs untouched. By evoking the idea of a primordial soup as the origin of all life, the wisdom and plan of the Creator was apparently replaced by pure contingency and meaninglessness. The Genesis creation narrative not only explains the origin of human life but also places man within the larger frame of a divine plan and of divine foresight.

According to the Book of Genesis, God created the heavens and the earth, separated light from darkness, and gave life to every living being. Man and woman he created in His own divine image, in His own likeness, so that mankind may “rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground”. Upon which God blessed them and said to them “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.” As God´s creation, made in God´s own image, the life of man is from a Christian perspective divinely justified and dignified from the very beginning. The biblical explanation of human life thus imbues human existence with an unmistakable worth that is inseparable from our origin: Not only is all life sacred but in the plan of God man is also assigned a specific role and a particular task: As the only being created in the image of God man is placed above nature and as the ruler of nature. A hierarchical structure is evoked that from the outset lifts man above the animal and distances and distinguishes him from all other life forms. Instead of being subjected to the rule of nature – as in Darwin´s theory of evolution – man is from a Christian stance never reducible to nature but always more than mere matter, mere instincts, drives or biology: As one of the Church Fathers, Saint Augustine, stressed the human being is a unity of two substances: body and soul. Whereas the body is tied to the physical world of matter, the soul is the seat of reason and love and illumination whereby man may partake in the eternal and may approach the absolute rather than be the victim of chance and the plaything of nature.
Different ways of life

As in the case of the question of human values and dignity, what a meaningful existence implies, how it should be understood or pursued, by which means it should be obtained, has been the battle scene of thinkers for millennia. Indeed one may even ask to what extent the very concept of “meaning” is itself meaningful: Is there only one meaning of existence? And what does meaning mean when we talk about life? Is it comparable to the meaning of a sentence or a book? To the meaning of a film? Or another problem: Is meaning something that life has or something it is given? Who gives what to whom? The very ideas of “life” and of “meaning” are far from simple, univocal or easily determinable phenomena: Are they gifts to be cherished or problems to be solved? What are the limits of life and of meaning and on what scene of abstraction or idealization do the two ever meet or unite? In a field of tension rather than resolution the history of philosophy provides a wealth of different answers: Each with its own interpretation of life and its consequences, pleasures, reasons, or difficulties. In the following, a definition of hedonism, Epicurianism, Stoicism, and Asceticism will focus on some of the multiple ways that the questions of life and meaning have been interpreted in the past.

Hedonism

The word hedonism derives from the Greek noun hedone meaning pleasure, enjoyment or delight. Central to the teachings of hedonism – a school that was founded by the Greek philosopher Aristippus of Cyrene – is that pleasure is the highest good and the pursuit of pleasure therefore man’s primal aim. From a hedonistic perspective human existence is caught in a dialectics between pain and pleasure which in truth defines life itself: Whereas the absolute avoidance of pain and the complete fulfilment of pleasure might be unattainable it remains the goal of human striving. All human actions and thoughts can thus be explained according to this simple scheme and opposition. However, as already Aristippus recognized, this initial simplicity and generalization might in reality and in praxis prove to be less clear and unidirectional. Thus an excess of pleasure might turn into its opposite: pain – too much enjoyment leads to sufferance instead of bliss. Contrary therefore to today’s understanding of hedonism which commonly signifies the uninhibited pursuit of enjoyment and the complete surrender to pleasurable things, Aristippus himself as well as his disciple Hegesias stressed that the limitation of desires is necessary for their satisfaction.

Epicurianism

Following in the footsteps of Aristippus, the philosopher Epicurus holds that virtue and the art of pleasure are identical – pleasure is the main objective of human existence. But as the hedonists Epicurus also recognizes that too much pleasure and the endless pursuit of pleasure might in the end cause more misery than joy. In the constant striving for happiness man may in fact become thoroughly unhappy and dissatisfied, in the endless chase after joy life itself may turn
joyless and bitter. In the turmoil of emotions and drives, of passions and desires, the road to satisfaction easily changes into a labyrinth of despair. Rather than promoting the absolute free rein to our drives, Epicurus thus announces a philosophical retreat instead: More important than positive pleasure is the absence of pain, more important than reaching the peaks of joy is the calm contentment of the soul. In the end tranquility is therefore the highest good, peace of mind the greatest bliss.

Stoicism

In the school of the Stoics the Epicurean tranquility finds its equivalent in the concept known as “Stoic calm”. Instead of taking the active pursuit of pleasure as their starting point, the Stoic philosophers state from the outset that a quiet, peaceful life is in every way preferable to a life governed by desires. Not only can pleasure never function as a dignified purpose for man but also emotions such as hope and desire, fear and pain, are to be altogether avoided. Instead of finding himself in the grip of agitation and stirring emotions, man should cultivate a passionless and virtuous life. The four virtues – prudence, courage, temperance, and justice – should be sought only for their own sake and not for the exterior purposes or ends they may serve. In the teaching of the Stoics virtues are thus independent of any question of pleasure. If man does not seek happiness, does not wish for any external goods, pain and disappointment is also avoided. The individual who owns little and needs even less is not an easy prey to loss – cannot be the victim of great misfortune. Stoic apathy thus comes to supplant hedonistic enjoyment. To seek disengagement rather than engagement, withdrawal from the external world rather than involvement, internal peace rather than external pursuit – such is the Stoic apathy that shields the individual from the sufferance of existence. Stoicism is more than anything therefore a consoling philosophy: What it seeks to secure is the greatest possible absence of grief, of turmoil, and disturbance. As such Stoicism is inevitably tied to a highly sceptic if not pessimistic ground: The less one expects of life the less one will be disappointed. Apathy is hence an attitude of general disinterest and detachment preserving calm at the expense of sentiment. To the Stoics, the prize of sentiment is, however, a modest prize compared to the potential gain: An existence unshakeable by any external events, immune to the uncertainties and unpredictability of the world.

Asceticism

Similar to Stoicism, asceticism centers on the withdrawal from the external world and on the abstinence from worldly pleasures. Derived from the Greek term askesis, the word “ascetic” originally referred to an exercise or training – in the Ancient Greece the training of athletes in preparation for competitions and events. However, the word is today more commonly associated with a religious practice in which the very abstinence from bodily desires and physical gratification opens a realm for spiritual pursuits instead. By the renunciation of material possessions and the turn to inner contemplation, external distractions are supplanted by a focus on spiritual aims. An
emphasis on self-discipline and self-governance is thus inevitably crucial to the frugal lifestyle that asceticism promotes.

Asceticism plays a pivotal role in several of the world’s great religions: Different variations of ascetic virtues are pursued in Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. What Buddha’s asceticism shares with the Catholic friar and preacher, Saint Francis of Assisi’s asceticism, is the fundamental belief in the hindrance that bodily needs and earthly desires pose on the ascent towards enlightenment. Freed from the constraints and allurements of corporeal existence, the mind and heart may be purified to serve nobler needs and strive for higher goals. In Christianity, the term ascetical theology thus describes a pursuit of perfection where the complete devotion to the teachings of the Bible and the love of Christ lifts human existence out of the snares of the world and towards the divine order of God.

Concept and Origin of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Different choices and ways of life, different concepts of the purpose and ultimate meaning of existence, different traditions and beliefs all have one thing in common: In order to be freely practiced and expressed they must be protected by laws that prevent oppression and discrimination, they must be based on a common ground that enhances the respect of diversity and upholds the right of all individuals to choose their own path of life and define their own values. It is this fundamental insight that serves as one of the founding principles and motives for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was written by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in 1948 and soon adapted by a large number of countries worldwide. The need for a declaration that unambiguously states the right to life for all human beings and stresses the dignity and fundamental sanctity of human life had become painfully evident after the atrocities and horrors of World War II. If all human beings are to enjoy certain inborn, inviolable, and universal rights, it requires a universal consent and commitment. Whereas World War II had clearly demonstrated the complete devaluation of human lives that followed from the bitter and relentless fight between nations, a new order was to be imposed that sought to unite all countries and all peoples in the mutual recognition of a few basic and inviolable principles and rights – shared by all of humanity.

The very idea of human rights has a long history that extends far beyond the 20th century. One of the earliest examples of a law drafted to protect certain basic, human rights is the Magna Carta which was issued in England in the Middle Ages. The intention of Magna Carta was to oblige the highest authority and supreme ruler, the English king, to respect and honor a few laws protecting the people from grave injustices and severe legal violations. Most famous among them are the habeas corpus which grants a person the right to report an unlawful imprisonment before the court and thus obliges the court to determine whether the custodian has lawful authority to detain the prisoner. Habeas corpus is therefore fundamentally about the safeguarding of the liberty of the subject. Magna Carta also includes the right to due process entitling every detainee to a fair and impartial trial declaring that “no man of what state or condition he be, shall be put out of his lands
or tenements nor taken, nor disinherited, nor put to death, without he be brought to answer by due process of law.”

The next important steps in the development of human rights were undertaken in Europe and America during the Age of Enlightenment and culminated with the French “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen” and with the “United States Declaration of Independence”. Both the French and the American declarations followed in the immediate wake of two great revolutions: First the American Revolution in 1776 in which American colonists overthrew the authority of Great Britain, declared independence, and founded the United States of America – and then shortly after, in 1789, the French Revolution where the monarchy and rule of the French king Louis XVI was abolished in favor of a French republic governed by the people. These two events that changed the face and course of European and American history were not completely separate incidents but were both born of a spirit and a new way of thinking that shared a common belief in the fundamental freedom and rights of people. Against the great injustices and general lack of freedom characteristic of previous times, the new governments should emphasize and promote equality and freedom of all men. Thus the United States Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” With this famous passage the scope of human rights were broadened like never before and the very perspective on human existence had changed: Far from the hierarchical social structures of absolute monarchy or feudal rule which privileged a few men at the cost of the many – the new governance was bound by law to consider all men of equal worth and thus to treat them equally before the law.

Overview of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is the culmination of this historical development aiming at not only ameliorating the conditions of man but also of acknowledging the shared and irreducible dignity of all people regardless of race, color, sex, religion, or political ideals. Elements of the Magna Carta as well as of the United States Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen are thus repeated and often developed further in the UN Declaration: The “habeas corpus” of the Magna Carta which sought to protect English citizens against unlawful imprisonment reappears in the UDHR as a universal entitlement “to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him”. And as the UDHR further states: “Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.” With the increase of rights of the individual the responsibilities of the courts are thereby also enlarged: A fair and impartial tribunal is not sufficient if the remedies of the defence are insufficient: In order to have a just and fair trial the criminally charged individual must also be fairly represented. This increase in responsibilities concerns, however, not only the courts and the legal system but constitutes an overall – nationwide as well as global – intent to provide all
people with a number of basic rights. Among these we find: the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state; the right to a nationality; the right to own property; the right to marry and to found a family; the right to work and to free choice of employment; the right to freedom of opinion and expression; the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family; the right to social security; the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays; the right to own property alone as well as in association with others – among several other basic rights. But the one right that serves as the very foundation and fundamental source of all other rights is: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person – which in the UDHR follows immediately after this declaration: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. The spirit of brotherhood thus resonates through the ages – from century-old declarations and laws up to the human rights and conventions of the present day – as the promise of a united humanity.

Two Types of Rights

Concerning human rights, a distinction should be made and a dividing line drawn between two kinds of rights: positive rights and negative rights. This will be explained in more detail.

Positive Rights

In the UDHR both negative and positive rights are listed – without it being made explicit which rights belong to which of the two fundamental groups. In order to distinguish between them and be able to group them, the basic question is: To what extent does a right protect the individual from being subjected to the will and action of others? Or to what degree does a right entitle the individual to demand the action and engagement of others? In the first case, the primary scope of the right is to secure the freedom and independence of the individual against external violation and suppression. In the second case, the aim is to provide the individual with certain means to sustain life or improve his living conditions. What is called “negative right” is therefore what protects the individual from harm in acting as a free agent, and what is termed “positive right” is what entitles the individual to receive means or help from outside. Among the positive rights in the UDHR are therefore: the right to social security or the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of the individual and his family. These are positive rights since social security and the right to a certain standard of living can only be enforced through the commitment and involvement of the society and the state. The state is thus obliged to provide medical care in case one gets sick and requires medical attention or the state is obliged to provide help for the poor or the disabled so that they may not only sustain life but also live a tolerable life and have a decent existence. In some countries the positive rights also include the right to education so that everyone –
regardless of their background or social position – may have equal access to knowledge and thereby, at least in principle, have equal opportunity in life. This right follows from the ideal that if all human beings are born equal they should also receive equal opportunities to pursue their own happiness and personal goals. The right to education is thus also provided in recognition of the great inhibitions and severe consequences that the burden of negative social inheritance may have. The right to education is commonly perceived as a means to promote social mobility and lessen the impact of negative social inheritance so that the opportunities of the individual are not entirely predetermined by his social background. In all instances, positive rights therefore describe the entitlement to receive certain goods or be the beneficiary of help provided by society.

Negative Rights

Since negative rights describe the rights that are to protect the individual from being subjected to the will and actions of others, it is commonly referred to as the first generation of rights – providing the most basic of human rights: The very right to life itself thus figures among the negative rights as the first and primordial human right. But the list also includes political and social rights such as the right to freedom of speech and freedom of religion: The individual is hereby guaranteed that his opinions cannot be lawfully suppressed by censorship – nor can his beliefs be the subject of discrimination or prohibition. The individual is at liberty to choose his own values and follow his own ideals. As rights that exist to honor and uphold the free choice and actions of the individual, the list of negative rights thus also include: the right to free choice of employment, the right to marry and to form a family, the right to own property, the right to freedom of movement.

Rights and Responsibility

If a general description of human rights and the overall distinction between negative and positive rights appear easily discernible and unproblematic, the problems and uncertainties, however, quickly arise once we descend from the level of ideality and abstract intention to the level of concrete application. With each right declared, there are potentially also multiple questions, issues, and conflicts that arise when the unambiguous letter of the law has to be translated into actual situations and concrete circumstances. Thus, for example, the freedom of opinion and expression exercised and enjoyed by one individual may easily conflict with the “spirit of brotherhood” and the fundamental respect to which another individual is equally entitled. If one right therefore conflicts with another the question becomes: Which of the two parties and of the two rights should be prioritized? Should one in the name of the freedom of speech be entitled to utter anything regardless of the consequences and unaffected by the harm this may cause to other people? Or should one in respect of others and in accordance with the right to protection from discriminative or degrading utterances and behavior in effect seek to limit the freedom of speech and incriminate certain statements and censor certain opinions? How can one make this decision? On what grounds or according to which criteria? According to the UDHR both the target or victim of an abusive
statement and the one who expresses it are equally entitled to protection. The one against abuse and the other against censorship. No clear answer is therefore to be found in the UDHR itself and a judgement has to be made that can no longer be based on the letter of the law but has to evolve from an interpretation and an evaluation of the spirit of the law: What is the essential intention that motivated the promotion of the given rights? What are the values beneath and beyond the letters that gave rise to each singular right? Or, to put it slightly differently: What kind of society is it that we want to build and to have? What sort of community do we seek to establish and what should serve as the guiding principles for our human interactions? Once the ideally univocal letter of the law is supplanted by an interpretation of the spirit of the law, the doors to a plurality of voices and different opinions are inevitably opened as well. Hence, to provide just one example, utilitarians will commonly hold that the aim of human rights is to maximize happiness for the largest possible group of people. To the extent that the freedom of speech from a quantitative as well as qualitative perspective and estimation creates more unhappiness than happiness, it follows that the right to be protected from offensive and hurtful statements should be prioritized over the right to the liberty of expression. From a utilitarian perspective, the argument for limiting and censoring certain statements and opinions may thus carry more weight than the argument in favor of an unlimited and absolute freedom of speech. However, the very same dilemma and question will in all likelihood be answered very differently when a liberal instead of a utilitarian perspective is applied. For the liberals, the basic freedom of man and the independent, uninhibited liberties of the individual – including the unlimited right to express one’s mind – will generally be considered to be of greater importance and value than the protection from offensive speech and the limits on speech that this protection necessarily entails. When freedom rather than happiness serves as the primary scale of measurement, the conclusion reached by a liberal may therefore easily turn out to be the very opposite of what a utilitarian will conclude. When the letter of the law can no longer supply the answer and two distinct rights come into conflict, it thus becomes extremely difficult to reach a just decision. The very meaning of “just” is here inevitably subject to different interpretations and sets of value. To a significant degree, the UDHR depends therefore not only on the state, the politicians or the legal system – it very much relies on the personal responsibility of each citizen to seek a balance between their own rights and liberties and the respect of the rights of others. In actuality rather than in the ideal form of written declarations and laws the individual is not only the beneficiary of certain rights but also needs to apply these rights in a manner that makes the community possible and sustainable. In other words: The UDHR is only viable to the extent that people as well as governments continuously breathes life into it and keeps it alive by actively making it possible and durable. The authority and importance of human rights can only be a hollow postulation if it is not supported by the will to give them authority and importance. What the human rights truly signify, what they mean to our individual lives as well as to our shared existence, how they direct our values and opinions, can never be formulated and written down as a declaration or as a set of laws, but is the impermanent, malleable and ever changing center of the stable and dead letters of the law – a center which has to be reapplied, relived, renegotiated and re-sculpted ever again by each person as an individual and as part of a community. It is precisely because the permanent letters are based on impermanent situations, because the certitude of the declarations are founded on inescapable uncertainty, and because the stability and univocality of rights rests on the
shaky ground of difference of opinions, beliefs, and ideologies, that the very beneficiaries of the rights also have to be their benefactors. As such, human rights are not only a gift handed down from above – from the governments, the courts, the judges and the politicians – but is essentially a gift that the people of any society, state or nation, decides to give and hand to each other.

**Definition of Abortion, Euthanasia, and Suicide**

As in the previously given example of the difficulties that may arise when one human right collides with another, so the most fundamental questions of human existence – the right to life and the right to death – are perpetually subject to great controversies and multiple conflicts. Similar to the question of free speech, we find in the question of abortion that different rights which separately appear easily discernible and easily applicable become truly complex once they are brought up against each other and into a genuine conflict of interests. Thus in the question of abortion there are once again the rights of two parties which both have to be respected and honored. On the one side there is the woman who wishes to terminate her pregnancy. Given that every individual is entitled to decide freely over his or her own body and, as stated in the UDHR, to enjoy protection from external pressure or interference in matters of “privacy, family, and home”, there can from this perspective be no doubt that a woman also has the right to choose abortion. Only the pregnant woman herself should decide if she wishes to terminate the pregnancy or not – only she can be the judge of her own body, her own wishes and concerns. Now, what complicates this freedom and right of hers is obviously that her decision does not exclusively affect her own existence but also the existence of the fetus or the unborn child. Terminating her pregnancy the woman also determines the fate of the fetus or life she carries within her. Who or what entitles her to make this decision on the unborn’s behalf? Should the unborn not enjoy certain rights as well? Does the UDHR not clearly state in one of its very first articles that “everyone has the right to life”? Inevitably the question is inseparable from the very way in which the dilemma is framed, interpreted, and understood. Everything depends on our definitions – which again reflect our beliefs and our values. And as the very tool of framing and defining, language itself is far from innocent in this regard, but always permeated with ideology: To call the unborn a fetus or a child, a something or a someone, an “it” or a person – everything else follows from these semantics and these choices. In case the unborn is regarded as a living being, as a child, it necessarily follows that this child has rights – on equal footing with his mother. Most crucial and fundamental among these rights is the right to life. To “terminate” a pregnancy thus means: To end someone’s life. Abortion can from this perspective and following this reasoning under no circumstances be defended but should be regarded as a criminal and thus punishable act. The sanctity of all lives precludes a priori the possibility of endorsing or accepting abortion. However, the very same problem leads to the opposite answer if the question itself is defined in different terms: To the extent that one talks of a fetus or an embryo instead of a child or a person, abortion no longer means to end a life but rather to stop a development that would eventually lead to a life. Abortion is from this perspective therefore not an act directed against somebody, but an act that still only regards the single body of the individual woman. Taking this position and defining life in these terms there can therefore be no
doubt that every woman is entitled to decide over her own body and thus to terminate an unwanted pregnancy.

What the question of abortion as well as the questions of euthanasia and suicide all bring to the fore are therefore the very way that we define and value life itself: How do we circumscribe life? Where does it begin and where does it end? What seems self-evident and unquestionable at a distance becomes far more complicated the closer one looks. Hence euthanasia – the act of ending the life of a person who is terminally ill and has no prospects of recovering – may appear as an act of mercy or as an act of violence depending on where the boundaries are placed. Does life depend on our heartbeat, on our consciousness, on our suffering, on our joys? When is the life of a person still a human life – and when does it become inhuman? To be for or against euthanasia depends – as in the case of abortion – on the values that we consider to found the very existence of mankind. And when a person decides to commit suicide and thus makes his own choice to end his life – one may equally wonder: Is this really his choice to make? Does the right to life also include the right to death?

Right to Life and to Death

One main discrepancy regarding these issues is found between a liberal approach and a Christian approach. According to liberals, the choices of life and death are the unique responsibility of the individual and no one has the right to interfere with the choices and inviolable freedom of the individual. The person who either by his own hand or by medical and professional assistance wants to end his life is therefore completely entitled to choose to commit suicide or to have his life terminated by the practice of euthanasia. This entitlement or right is situated at the very core of the liberal values and beliefs, since liberalism essentially regards freedom as the single most important and ultimately defining feature of humanity. Human life is only dignified to the extent that it is based on individual choice, on the self-governance and self-responsibility of every human being. However, when human existence is no longer based on the individual but grounded on Christian or religious beliefs, the matter looks altogether different: One is no longer responsible uniquely for oneself and responsibly only by oneself, but one is also responsible for one’s actions before God. From a Christian stance, all human decisions and human judgment is in the end judged again and finally by God. More important than individual freedom is therefore Christian piety. To honor life as the gift of God instead of cherishing freedom as the fruit of life brings the liberals and the Christians into opposition in the basic questions discussed above: Abortion, euthanasia, and suicide. When Christians in the vein of Saint Augustine regard the freedom of man as the freedom to choose God and liberals see the freedom of man as the freedom that makes man man, the outcome cannot but collide: For liberals we sculpt our own destiny and are our own continuous makers. Any decision should therefore confirm and protect our freedom and not delimit or derail it. Despite such oppositions, history has, however, also provided several examples of constellations where Christianity and liberalism meet and merge: Liberal Christianity and Christian liberals are both important examples of such constellations. Where Christianity and liberalism merge the questions of abortion, euthanasia, and suicide thus become an internal debate and discussion – in
the case of Christian liberals often with the result that abortion, euthanasia, and suicide are condemned.

**Questions for further reflection:**

1. In what ways does the scientific explanation of the origin of life challenge the value and dignity of human life? Is this challenge necessarily negative or may it also have positive effects?
2. Wherein lies the importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights today? What should be the main purpose and role of human rights in our modern and globalized world?

**Recommendations for further reading:**


