

# The Depth of the Human Person

*A Multidisciplinary Approach*

*Edited by*

Michael Welker

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## *Acknowledgments*

This book documents the results of an interdisciplinary and international dialogue about the depths of the human person. It forges new paths toward a multidisciplinary anthropology. Over several years we brought together theologians, philosophers and ethicists, scientists from the areas of biology, psychology, and physics, and scholars in the fields of Old Testament, New Testament, patristic studies, systematic anthropology, and law. The scholars came from the USA, England, Scotland, Germany, Japan, and India.

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## Introduction

*Michael Welker*

In dialogues about anthropology, theologians, philosophers, and scientists wrestled with a polarization between “mentalistic” and “physicalistic” approaches for many years.<sup>1</sup> They felt trapped in dualisms and reductionisms on both sides and tried to escape and overcome this situation with “multi-dimensional” approaches that could do justice to the “complexity of human personhood.”

### I. Introductory Questions

The philosopher **Andreas Kemmerling** (“Why Is Personhood Conceptually Difficult?”) is provoking with respect to both the laments about “reductionisms” and the hopes for an alternative. He begins his contribution with an open attack on seemingly reductionistic, in fact wrong and misleading statements such as “You’re nothing but a bunch of neurons” (Francis Crick) or “. . . you are your brain” (Michael Gazzaniga, Manfred Spitzer). He calls these remarks “pseudo-scientific stupidities” and quotes John Langshaw Austin: “. . . There is nothing so plain boring as the constant repetition of assertions that are not true, and sometimes not even faintly sensible.”

1. W. S. Brown, N. Murphy, and H. N. Malony, eds., *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); M. Jeeves, ed., *From Cells to Souls — and Beyond: Changing Portraits of Human Nature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); E. K. Soulen and L. Woodhead, eds., *God and Human Dignity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

On the other hand, he warns against dreams “to regain a complex concept of human personhood,” which had been inspired by the antique identification of “person” and *prosopon*, “the mask” as the interface of individual private and public human relations. Kemmerling speaks of a “bewildering conceptual plenitude of person.” The concept of a person is “a vexing one,” and it is “inexhaustibly rich.” With respect to Descartes and Locke, he analyzes two of the most influential philosophical classics, which used the concept for very different purposes. For Descartes, the concept of a person expresses the commonsensical impression of a mind-body union, which clear metaphysical thought cannot validate. For Locke, the concept of the person is a complex idea, based on consciousness and memory, most relevant to support ideas and practices in morals and law.

The theologian **Michael Welker** describes the initial research project and its transformation in the course of the dialogue. He examines the rich anthropology of Paul (“Flesh–Body–Heart–Soul–Spirit: Paul’s Anthropology as an Interdisciplinary Bridge-Theory”), which is framed by the dualism of “spirit and flesh,” anthropological modes of the dualism of eternity and finitude. Although “flesh” stands for the ultimately futile attempt to sustain one’s life by securing nourishment and reproduction and for the sobering fact that life lives at the expense of other life, it should not be demonized as such. The human heart, with its cognitive emotional and volutative capacities, is of flesh, and our fleshly basis is the core of our natural and historical unique identity. On the other hand, Paul warns the tongues-speaking Corinthians against an enthusiasm for a direct encounter with God in pure spirit. “Better five words spoken with reason than 10,000 words uttered in tongues” (1 Cor. 14:19).

The qualification of the framing dualism opens sensitivities for Paul’s appreciation of the body as both fleshly and shaped by mind and spirit, by the polyphony of its members and powers, moving beyond and against the self-preserving tendencies of the flesh. Like almost all of the biblical authors, Paul does not ascribe any special salvific power to “the soul.” It just stands for the mind-body unity, for the whole person (“a village of two hundred souls”). Anthropological investigations should rather focus on the heart, the conscience, and the spirit, on their enormous powers and their enormous vulnerabilities to distortion and corruption. Political, legal, and moral interests are, according to Paul, in urgent need of a genuinely theological orientation, if the human spirit is to be led by the Spirit of God and its saving and ennobling powers.

The theologian **Philip Clayton** (“Emergence, the Quest for Unity, and God: Toward a Constructive Christian Theology of the Person”) starts with

reflections on the complex unity of the human person “from the standpoint of an emergentist interpretation of biological and cultural evolution.” He attempts to connect the scientific picture of persons “as complex bio-physical-psycho-social units” with a theologically grounded understanding of a divine spiritual agency. He then challenges Christian theology to come up with an answer to the question: In what way could both sets of results be supplemented by “specifically Christian affirmations about human nature”? These “supplements,” however, should be compatible with the interdisciplinary “emergentist interpretation” and with theological and metaphysical perspectives on divine agency.

Clayton proposes eight levels of a “multifaceted human unity” which spans the empirical unity of the existing person, the unity of the mind or the soul, the spiritual unity of body and soul, the unity of the image of God and the corporate unity of the body of Christ, the unity with Christ in the Spirit and — in and through it — with the will and the life of God. One could read this as an interdisciplinary yet theologically oriented proposal, to capture the dynamic unity of the person as an “elevated” and “ascending” existence.

## II. Scientific Perspectives

The physicist and theologian **John Polkinghorne** (“Towards an Integrated Anthropology”) argues that science and theology should help each other in dealing with the vexing complexity of the human person. They should acknowledge “that the context for hominid evolution was much richer than the physico-biological setting that canonical Darwinian theory supposes.” He proposes to work with a model of a mind/body complementarity for which the wave/particle duality of light could become a paradigm example. In his view, a reconceptualization of the soul is required, which could allow us to develop a “dual-aspect, energy/information scientific description” of anthropological complexity. The important role of information in evolutionary processes should become deciphered with respect to the soul as “information-bearing pattern.”

With these ideas, John Polkinghorne does not want to argue for an intrinsic immortality of the soul: “As far as naturalistic thinking is concerned, the pattern carried by the body will dissolve with the body’s decay. Yet it is a perfectly coherent Christian hope that the faithful God will not allow that pattern to be lost, but will preserve it in the divine memory.” Polkinghorne encourages future dialogue and research to use the differentiated and subtle

insights into biblical anthropology to penetrate the extremely rich concept of “information” that would be needed to deal with the vexing complexity of the human person.

The psychologist **Malcolm Jeeves** argues that a “holistic model of the human person does most justice to the scientific understanding of ourselves” (“Brains, Minds, Souls, and People: A Scientific Perspective on Complex Human Personhood”). He first describes the fast changes in the “accepted scientific story” in the area of mind-brain research over the last decades. In recent years, studies of the localization of functions within the brain have had to be qualified and corrected with respect to the evidence of the brain’s plasticity. The power of top-down effects on the brain has become increasingly evident and important in the study of mind-brain links.<sup>2</sup>

Although our mental capacities and behaviors are “firmly embodied in our physical makeup,” there is clear evidence for an irreducible interdependence between the cognitive level and the physical level of human existence. This leads Jeeves to postulate — against Descartes — a “primary ontological reality of ‘person,’” a “duality without dualism,” as he says. He concludes with remarks on the relation of neuropsychological, evolutionary psychological, and theological claims about the imago Dei. The attempts to identify the imago Dei with the capacity to reason, the capacity for moral behavior and moral agency, and the capacity for personal relatedness have served as boundary markers to distinguish human beings and animals. All these former boundaries are now open fields of research. Jeeves argues for a genuinely theological top-down approach that sets the divine activity “apart from all others in heaven and on earth” and provides anthropological orientation without stressing speciestic arguments.

**Warren S. Brown**, also a psychologist, pushes the question further: “In what ways are we humans nested within the biological world and to what extent do we transcend biology?” (“The Emergence of Human Distinctiveness”). He discusses several candidates for human neurocognitive distinctiveness: the enhanced size of the frontal lobes of humankind, specific neurons, relatively unique to the human brain (“Von Economo Neurons”), the capacity to use language, etc.<sup>3</sup> He then proposes to step toward a theory of dynamical systems in order to understand what others have called “the holism of difference”

2. Cf. more recently T. Fuchs, *Das Gehirn — ein Beziehungsorgan. Eine phänomenologisch-ökologische Konzeption*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2012).

3. Cf. also M. Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); *Origins of Human Communication* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2008).

(Matthias Jung: “Differenzholismus des Menschlichen”),<sup>4</sup> which divides the realm of humans from the primates and other species.

Brown distinguishes different levels of organization, the development of more complex forms of environmental response and interaction, as well as greater degrees of freedom. These differences of ordered complexity can occur on thermodynamic, psychological, social, or other levels. Brown speaks of a “cultural scaffolding,” which shapes the environments in order to improve the interactive processes with them. He warned against cognitivist and computational views that dissociate minds “from embodied life in the world.” Like Malcolm Jeeves, he concludes with encouragement that we should take specific shapes of our social, cultural, and religious environments more seriously in order to understand human distinctiveness.

The biologist **Jeffrey Schloss** (“Hierarchical Selection and the Evolutionary Emergence of ‘Spirit’”) reflects on the tension between what could be called the “evolutionary solidarity” of all creation and the obvious observation of different levels and hierarchies of life. He starts with the critique of “three hallmark postulates of reductionism in twentieth-century biology”: the triumph of mechanism over vitalism, the propagation of the gene as “the ‘atom’ of biology,” and the claim that the human mind is primarily concerned with the enhancement of reproductive fitness.

Schloss describes the long battle between mechanism and vitalism and its impacts on the extrusion of “spirit” and “soul” in so-called serious science and educated common sense. He shows how the unification “of Darwinian selection and Mendelian genetics in the synthetic theory of evolution” transforms and yet prolongs this situation of a scientific naturalism, which culminates in the speculative invention of so-called “memes” (“ideational replicators” as twins of the genes).<sup>5</sup> He questions that social and cultural evolution could be “wholly reducible to or constrained by genetic selection.” He proposes to consider that there are life-enhancing and ennobling “ideas,” which are “not (merely) transmitted, or intuitively innate, or rationally constructed, but discovered.” At this level, he sees the need and the potential to rethink the emergence of “spirit.”

4. Matthias Jung, *Der bewusste Ausdruck. Anthropologie der Artikulation* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2009), pp. 54–58.

5. The term “memes” was invented by Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1976), and has been popularized by Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

### III. Sources of the Traditions

The Old Testament scholar **Andreas Schüle** (“Soul’ and ‘Spirit’ in the Anthropological Discourse of the Hebrew Bible”) draws attention to the fact that “worldviews matter, when it comes to anthropological concepts such as ‘body,’ ‘soul,’ or ‘spirit.’” However, a simple juxtaposition of an ancient (religious) worldview and a modern (scientific) worldview will not be helpful at all. He describes an important change of worldviews already reflected by the anthropological discourse of the Old Testament. This change is connected with the shift of anthropological concentration from the soul (*nefesh*) to the spirit (*ruach*).

The Persian period brings a shift from belief in a cultic presence of God to belief in God’s cosmic presence. A highly differentiated discourse develops the conceptuality of divine and human spirit in order to grasp this presence. Different traditions connect the spirit with different basic functions. At least one of these traditions discourages any speculation about a material and spiritual human existence beyond its life on earth (Ecclesiastes). Over against this, we see at the edge of the Old Testament canon within its Greek transmission the emergence of the idea of a soul in God’s hands, possibly an immortal soul (Wisdom of Solomon 2:23). Only the view that the soul can be rescued by God’s saving work but not a created immortality is shared by the other biblical traditions.

The contribution of the New Testament scholar **Gerd Theissen** (“*Sarx, Soma, and the Transformative Pneuma: Personal Identity Endangered and Regained in Pauline Anthropology*”) opens our eyes to the fact that in Paul’s letters “often but not always” the body (*soma*) “has a positive connotation in ethical, ecclesiological, and eschatological contexts.” However, when Paul contrasts the “internal and external” human being, he can associate the body with the flesh (*sarx*) and connect it with very negative statements. Theissen shows that Paul is not trapped into a static dualistic anthropology, but rather develops a “transformative” anthropology and cosmology. While the flesh “represents the (biotic-based) energy of life that must be repressed . . . the body is the energy that can be sublimated” by the transformative power of the spirit.

Theissen identifies ethical (Rom. 12:1), ecclesial (1 Cor. 12:12ff.; Rom. 12:4ff.), and eschatological (1 Cor. 15:44; Rom. 8:11) transformations of the body. By nature, the body is passive and mortal, but by the power of the spirit it can be given new life and become the bearer of eschatological hope. A similar ambivalence has to be noticed with respect to the human spirit. Paul can identify the human mind and human spirit, he can stress the opposition of the human mind/spirit and the divine spirit, and he can praise the salvific

encounter of the human spirit with the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Christ. With some reflections on “the dissociative soul in ancient Egypt and ancient Greece” and on “the renewal of an integrated concept of personhood in early Christianity,” Theissen illuminates the *weltanschauliche* background of Paul’s seminal anthropology.

The patristic scholar **Volker Henning Drecoll** (“Augustine’s Aporetic Account of *Persona* and the Limits of *Relatio*: A Reconsideration of Substance Ontology and Immutability”) analyzes the term “person” in Augustine’s work in general and in his brilliant book *De trinitate* in particular. He shows that the term *persona* is a cipher in his Trinitarian theology and that he avoids “the term *relatio* as quasi-ontological term.” This casts conventional attempts to make use of Augustine’s “psychological doctrine of the Trinity” to explain notions of the person — divine and human — into a negative light.

Drecoll cautiously encourages exploring the relation of love as a candidate to address the puzzling issues in Trinitarian theology and anthropology that caused Augustine and his followers to experiment with the notions of *persona* and *relatio*. Still, this attempt comes with a host of problems. Do the risks of failure and disappointment in human love require us to look for a radical difference between divine and human love? How can we reconcile the notion of a loving God with Augustine’s insistence on divine immutability?

**Eiichi Katayanagi**, a Japanese scholar of religious studies and philosophy, encourages us to take a more positive view of the epistemological potentials in Augustine’s work (“Augustine’s Investigation into *Imago Dei*”). He sees Augustine’s notion of the *imago Dei* as connected with this conviction that human beings have the “capacity of openness to eternity.” Similar to Drecoll, he is convinced that the relation of love offers a clue to grasp the essence of the human *persona*. The reflexive character of the will, concentrated on and shaped by love, “reveals both the essential nature of the human mind and God as the source of the mind.”

Katayanagi stresses the fascinating attempt in Augustine’s work to reconstruct the mind in search of its not-yet-known self. He describes the difference of a hidden unconscious and a conscious knowledge (*se nosse* and *se cogitare*). A deep hidden knowledge is embedded in pre-thematic memory. This knowledge has a Trinitarian structure, which, however, only becomes obvious in the emergence of the temporal knowledge that is found in the *cogitatio*. In this longing and loving outreach into the eternal depth of the *imago Dei*, the human being finds itself “already touched by God” and constituted as a true person.

The exploration of faith and emotions is further pursued by systematic

theologian **Markus Höfner** (“The Affects of the Soul and the Effects of Grace: On Melanchthon’s Understanding of Faith and Christian Emotions”). He starts with the observation that, according to biblical witnesses and many theological classics, the believer’s relation to God is seen as deeply shaped by emotions. He explores those “internal affections which are not within the individual’s power.” He also uses key texts of the reformer Melanchthon in order to reconstruct the process of phenomenological and theological clarification.

Höfner draws attention to two developments and moves in Melanchthon’s thought, which are not only seminal for his own theology but could also offer systematic inspiration for anthropological research today. One shift could be called: From the meditation of “inner” powers to the observation of “outer” expressions. In this shift, Melanchthon’s theologically interested theory of affects starts to use medical thinking and natural philosophy. The second shift overcomes bipolar constellations, for example, the concentration on the dual “affect and reason.” Höfner can show that Melanchthon uses reflections on the shaping of affects through rhetoric to observe interdependencies between affects, reason (understanding), and will. Already in Reformation days we thus find pathways toward an “anthropology of articulation.”

**Origen V. Jathanna**, a theologian from India, concludes the third part of the book with reflections on “The Concept of ‘Body’ in Indian Christian Theological Thought.” He observes in the Indian culture as well as across the globe today a strange tension between a cult and glorification of the body and a rejection or denigration of the body. He relates this tension to anthropological dualisms, which concern many contributions to this book. He also unfolds a stunning map of philosophical and theological positions in India, particularly in the twentieth century, on which we can identify different views on body, soul, and other dimensions of the human person. Different anthropological constellations are intertwined with different genuinely theological orientations, especially Christological, eschatological, and ethical perspectives. Theological and anthropological paradigms shape each other.

Jathanna observes the tendency in the contemporary realm of thought to contextualize reflections on the human person. Even the body is no longer considered “in isolation, but in the context of interpersonal, communitarian, gender-relational, societal, economic, structural, and ecological dimensions of the human existence.” This opens many opportunities not only for interdisciplinary but also for interreligious dialogues and the common search for insight and truth. Jathanna welcomes this situation but also reminds theologians that the perspective of the new creation in Jesus Christ, the hope of the “resurrectional transformation” and eschatological fulfillment should not be lost.

#### IV. Contemporary Challenges

The last part of the book begins with the question of whether the theological claim that human beings are created in the “image of God” can offer an equivalent to the concept of the dignity of the human person. The theologian **Bernd Oberdorfer** poses this question (“The Dignity of Human Personhood and the Concept of the ‘Image of God’”) and objects to quick and simple answers. He explores the talk about the image of God in biblical creation narratives, reflects on the Christological recalibration of the *imago Dei* in the New Testament, and analyzes three different ways of interpreting it in the history of Christian theology (quality, duty, relation).

The tension between the Christological interpretation of the *imago Dei* and the insistence on the universal validity of human dignity gives rise to a second set of questions. How do we relate specific religious ideas and symbols to normative concepts in general public life? How do we deal with different and even conflicting theological interpretations of specific religious ideas and symbols? Oberdorfer describes several routes of discourse and debate as future challenges and tasks in the churches, the academy, civil societies, and different secular publics.

**Stephan Kirste**, professor of law, deals with the topic “Human Dignity and the Concept of Person in Law.” He first reconstructs important steps in the history of the concept of “human dignity” and the attempts to interpret it as a legal term. The legal discourse led to a broad consensus that human dignity can only be defined “negatively from possible violations of it.” This again led to questions for a threshold to discriminate real violations of human dignity from all sorts of bothering and pestering among human beings.

Kirste shows that these questions have caused legal scholars to look back for philosophical and theological sources. Philosophical work on the concept of “the person” became relevant, and many discourses between law and philosophy have struggled to conceptualize the idea of a “legal person.” The final Solomonic formula comes as an impressive self-affirmation of legal thought: “The respect for human dignity” materializes “as the right to be recognized as a legal person.”

The theologian **Frank Vogelsang** (“On the Relation of Personhood and Embodiment”) describes the perspectives of broad common sense and popular philosophy concerning personhood and dignity. In the constructive parts of his contribution, he focuses on person-to-person interaction and the phenomenon and theories of mutual recognition. Drawing on the “phenomenology of the body,” developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponti, he intends to deepen

personalistic thought of the past and relate the philosophical to the scientific discourse. Simple imaginations of “the world in our body” and “our body in the world” have to be overcome and refined.

Following Merleau-Ponti, Vogelsang captures partial intransparencies in our relation to our bodily existence that have a deep impact on our most basic social interactions. We need a theory of recognition that can deal with our always partially opaque relation to ourselves and with the intransparency even of the most intimate “other.” He claims that “personhood stems from human encounters and mutual recognition.” It has to be seen whether this proposal can lead to an explanation and understanding of why personhood is conceptually so difficult.

**Maria Antonaccio**, a professor of religious ethics, defends the “depths of the human person as moral agent” against the illusion that a description of “the facts of human nature could exhaust” these depths (“Can Ethics Be Fully Naturalized?”). She describes current efforts to “naturalize” ethics and offers a typology of current debates over naturalization. Constructively, she tries to delineate a path between an ethical naturalism, which comes with “the danger of moral mediocrity and moral conventionalism,” and an “ethics of heroism or of the superhuman,” which can be bred from naturalist and nonnaturalist positions alike.

In a final set of reflections, she assesses criteria for a “naturalized ethics” that tries to avoid descriptive impoverishment by ignoring natural empirical effects of human existence. For the sake of an ethical realism, moral theory cannot escape the dialogue with the natural sciences. The danger on the other side is the normative impoverishment that occurs when principles of obligation become sacrificed with respect to “realistic adaptation” to natural conditions and human reality constituted only by so-called “scientific facts.” Both dangers can culminate in a collapse of normative and descriptive attempts in ethical theory. This would also lead to a theoretical impoverishment.

Practical theologian **Isolde Karle** (“Beyond Distinct Gender Identities: The Social Construction of the Human Body”) draws attention to the fact that contemporary anthropology emphasizes “the multitude of interdependencies between body, soul, and spirit.” Yet with respect to sexual identity, “the body continues to represent a solid and unshakable objective point of reference.” Following Pierre Bourdieu’s influential book “Male Domination,” she argues that the dichotomous gender metaphysics is a product of bourgeois nineteenth-century thought. In various ways, it conditions a dualistic habitus that is correlated with open and hidden forms and practices of male domination and violence.

Karle charges popular counterarguments (mostly based on the topic of motherhood) and twentieth-century theological affirmations of “the system of two genders.” She challenges theology to stop seeing the plurality of individuals and the variety of “gender migrants” as a threat to the institution of marriage and broader social order. The orientation toward the powers of new creation, in which there is no longer “male and female” (Gal. 3:28), and a gender system “that continues to oppress and disfigure souls and bodies” should draw us away from a fixation on the “anatomical details of a body” to the “life in the spirit of Christ, the spirit of love, trust, and freedom.”

**William Schweiker**, a theological ethicist (“Moral Inwardness Reconsidered”), wants to develop a “theological and also humanistic vision of the soul.” He engages exemplary positions in contemporary psychological and philosophical anthropology (Marc Hauser and Mary Midgley), which show a remarkable neglect for “human vulnerability that characterizes our lives as moral and religious beings.” Schweiker draws attention to the rich “cultural resources” that are to be found in the writings of Plato and Paul. He does not argue for a restitution of a Platonic or a so-called biblical worldview, but for a new type of thinking arising at their intersection.

It is a rich notion of a theologically oriented “moral inwardness” that has to deal with the double danger of divinization or profanization of the soul. Schweiker argues that the antique classics provide stronger arguments than the contemporary voices for the freedom of the soul and its “right to have rights,” but also for the real danger that “the integrity of the self can be lost, forsaken.” Deep visions and strong arguments are needed to counter cultural and religious, political and moral distortions, which threaten the human mind and life with various forms of decadence and degeneration, and also authoritarianism and tyranny.

**Günter Thomas**, a systematic theologian, concentrates on challenges “connected with intensive experiences of finiteness encounter (particularly) in the later phases of life” (“Human Personhood at the Edges of Life: Medical Anthropology and Theology in Dialogue”). He describes a multiple crisis connected with higher rates of aging and illness that most anthropologies are unable to address for structural reasons. He argues for the development of a theological framework that allows us to move beyond the affirmation of “intellectualism and moral self-determination.”

He shows that a Christological and pneumatological framework can host “social narrations” of personhood and human life that can incorporate its vulnerability, endangerment, and self-endangerment, but also its eschatological destinations, which contest that “decay, frailty, and death are . . . the last reality

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that human beings will face." This does not open a space of sheer illusions, but rather an area of deep individual and trans-individual experience and hope that is not monopolized by theology and religious faith.

## **I. Person and Personhood: Introductory Questions**