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# ARE HUMANS BY BIRTH AS WICKED AS THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM (3-11) HOLDS? A DIALOGUE BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND MODERN SCIENCES

## ABSTRACT

While the introduction compares the Heidelberg Catechism's theologically framed concept of sin with similar and opposing secular views of the past (e.g., Plautus, Quintilian, Hobbes), the main part uses contemporary scientific studies to challenge the Catechism's view that (after alienation from God in the Fall) all human individuals by birth are wicked: incapable of loving others. Studies discovered remarkable capacities of empathy and altruism already in young children of different cultures as well as in primates, suggesting that altruism is deep-rooted in common ancestors of humans and primates. However, humans encounter limits of their capacity for altruism especially when dealing with outsiders not belonging to their own group. Culture, especially religion, is needed to advance a systematic, and not just spontaneous, altruism reaching beyond one's group boundaries. Concluding remarks, using Paul, roughly sketch what a modern hamatology would have to emphasize if it is not moral corruptness.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

By using results of modern science, the essay challenges the view that all humans by birth are wicked and incapable of loving their neighbours. The Heidelberg Catechism frames this view theologically, as will be shown. But it has also existed in secular forms through the centuries. The Roman playwright Plautus, in his comedy *Asinaria* (495), once wrote *lupus est homo homini*, "the human being is a wolf to (his or her fellow)

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human.” Thomas Hobbes echoed this famous saying in the dedication of his *De cive* (“On the citizen”) by formulating *homo homini lupus*. In this book from 1642, he first described the natural state of humankind. It is characterized by the natural right to self-preservation, which in itself is good but immediately results in a state of brutal war because of the individuals’ conflicting efforts to preserve themselves. This dilemma calls for a stable central government, that is, the order of a (monarchical) state that is based on a contract between citizens and guarantees them a life in peace, as Hobbes explained in the book’s second part.<sup>1</sup> In the third part, he attempted to underpin his principal theses with theological reasons.

Despite obvious differences,<sup>2</sup> Hobbes’ famous dictum *homo homini lupus* also could be the heading of the first part of the Heidelberg Catechism. The Catechism focuses on the unredeemed human existence after the Fall of (an originally good) humankind represented in Adam and Eve: it focuses on the individual human’s “natural” state, which is “poisoned” and affects all individuals “from the beginning”. That is, they are born into it thanks to Adam and Eve’s “disobedience” toward God (Qu. 7), which resulted in

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1 John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau further developed the idea of a contract between humans in the natural state by adding the safeguard of property and freedom to the contract concept. They also moved the human natural state into a more positive light. For Locke, by nature humankind is a creature of reason. Only the few who do not live according to reason make it necessary to establish a civil society in which one’s property is safeguarded. For Rousseau, the natural state, which precedes differentiated social structures, is characterized by harmony and the capability of being sympathetic toward others.

2 Hobbes did not see the pre-government state of everyone fighting against everyone in a theological light. Moreover, Hobbes in his first section described the human natural state, while the Catechism, although using the phrase hateful of others “by nature” (Qu. 5), focused on the *fallen* human state *after* the pure natural state of creation (Qu. 6-9). Originally, humankind was created “good”, gifted with the capability of “knowing” God and “loving” God and the neighbour (Qu. 6, 9), a capacity that they lost after Adam and Eve’s Fall. However, these differences between Hobbes and the Catechism fade when both concepts are broken down to the *individual’s* existence: By birth, the individual cannot but act like a wolf and needs to be morally tamed, either by Christ’s salvation (Heidelberg Catechism, Qu. 15-18 *et al.*) or by a stable government (Hobbes). In this respect, both concepts are comparable. One might even ask whether Hobbes with his secular concept was partly inspired by the Reformers’ insight in the unredeemed human being’s fundamental wickedness. There are no direct sources for such an influence, but he grew up as a rural pastor’s son and was taught by a Puritan in Oxford after all.

complete<sup>3</sup> moral corruptness of their descendants (Qu. 8-10).<sup>4</sup> Question 5 formulates: “I am prone *by nature* to hate God and my neighbour,” so that the Bible’s double commandment to love God and the other is trampled upon (Qu. 3-4). Qu. 8 sounds even more radical: By nature, we are “so depraved that we are completely incapable of *any* good and prone to *all* evil.” In the mirror of the Biblical “Law of God” (Qu. 3), a wolf looks at us, incapable of loving (Qu. 4). Only “God’s Spirit” will enable us to do good (Qu. 8).<sup>5</sup>

The unredeemed individual’s “nature” after the Fall is the sinister background against which the light of redemption in the wonderful second part of the Catechism shines even brighter. The third part describes Christians’ thankfulness to God, which is shown in Christian practice. In these famous three steps, the Catechism also pursued the moral goal of reining in the morally loose human, a goal that the Electoral Prince in Heidelberg, Frederick III, bluntly mentions in his Catechism preface of 1563:

The schools have been depressed, the tender youth neglected ... As we saw such great deficiencies and considered that church, state and even the family were not built up, and that the citizens had no virtuousness and discipline, ... we wanted to counteract this evil as quickly as possible, being urged by this crisis.

The Prince desired that his subjects “increasingly get used to this (catechism) pervading their behaviour and acting.” The Prince’s catechism project thus not only served the salvation of his subjects’ souls and the education of his people, but also aimed at advancing the general morality and stabilizing the institutions of family, church and state in the Heidelberg region, the so-called Electoral Palatinate. Nobody could anticipate back then that this catechism, fathered by Ursinus and other Heidelberg colleagues, would move beyond the confines of Southwest Germany and tour the globe. Translated into about forty languages, it has had an impact on societies over the centuries, including South Africa.

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3 Qu. 8: “ganz und gar” (completely).

4 Moral corruptness: The unredeemed individual is incapable of *doing* what God’s law requires (Qu. 9), namely to love (Qu. 3-4). Instead all humans by birth generate “sinful *deeds*” (Qu. 10), if they remain without Christ. The root of this moral corruptness is construed theologically as disobedience to God (Qu. 7) and proneness to “hate God” (Qu. 5), which is sin “committed against the most high majesty of God” (Qu. 11).

5 For the Catechism’s concept of sin, see further, e.g., Huijgen *et al.* (2014), Welker (2013), Plasger (2012:55-69), Busch (1998:54-78).

In 1560, frustration with human wickedness had a very concrete *Sitz im Leben* in Heidelberg, beside the general lack of “virtuousness and discipline” that the Prince deplored in his Catechism preface. Before the Prince solicited the Catechism, the Electoral Palatinate was torn by religious disputes. Lutherans and Calvinists insulted and berated one another in Heidelberg, even from the pulpits, fighting about the true understanding of the Lord’s Supper. One time even a fistfight broke out on the marketplace in front of the town’s biggest church, the *Heiliggeistkirche*. Philipp Melanchthon (1560:6) advised the Prince, “that the brawlers on both sides be removed. Then ... it will be beneficial that the remaining ones come to an agreement about one form of the words.” Prince Frederick took drastic measures, ordering all pastors to accept a mediating formula proposed by Melanchthon,<sup>6</sup> firing those who refused, hiring Calvinists and Zwinglians, and ordering the creation of a Catechism that could pacify his country by unifying and standardizing the religious beliefs of his subjects and improving their moral behaviour.<sup>7</sup>

In antiquity, stoically influenced teachers such as Quintilian formulated: *natura ... nos ad mentem optimam genuit* (“Nature formed us for attaining the highest degree of virtue;” *Inst.* 12.11.12), from which optimistic pedagogics resulted (e.g., 12.2.1; 12.11.11-13; 1.1.16-17, 19). Quintilian even held that delinquents “can by any means be turned to a right course of life” (12.1.42). But this optimism faded. Since the Reformation, wickedness and corruptness, as being inherent to the unredeemed human individual’s basic disposition, became the starting point for all theorizing about human communal life and state order. The Heidelberg Catechism followed this line. Human evilness (Qu. 5, 7-11 in part 1 of the Catechism), due to alienation from God (Qu. 5, 7, 9, 11), was the pedagogical starting point for Ursinus’ deliberations about our salvation (part 2) and our acting in communal life (part 3).

## 2. SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVES

### 2.1 Empathy and altruism already in young children of differing cultures as well as primates

The question arises whether we can still endorse this completely negative picture of all “natural” human beings (after the Fall) in societies in which atheists obviously are capable of doing good. Even though the atrocities of

6 See the same Melanchthon *Iudicium*. The formula was based on Paul’s *koinonia tes somatos* in 1 Cor 10:16 (“sharing in the body of Christ”).

7 For the communion fight of 1560, see, e.g., Schaab (1992:38f.).

the 20<sup>th</sup> century or currently the tragic situation in Syria, for example, seem to support the thesis of the human wolf, we cannot dodge this question unless we want to repeat tradition just for its own sake.

It is true that in many cases – certainly not in all – religion is capable of boosting the virtuousness of the so-called “natural” human. But is Christianity the only means of achieving this, as the Catechism suggests? Matthew and Paul knew better when conceding that Jews and Gentiles do have respectable moral standards (Matt 5:46-47 [Q]; 7:9-11 [Q]; Phil 3:5-6; Rom 2:14f.).

Moreover, denying non-Christians the capability of doing good is out of touch of reality considering the results of the sciences. The sciences by now have discovered remarkable capacities of empathy and altruism not only in young children, but also in primates. Children at the age of four at the latest can empathize with another person’s suffering. Such empathy is not only based on simple emotional contagion<sup>8</sup> leading to crying with the other person. It also involves the child knowing that the other person hurts and that the child needs to do something helpful for this person. By the age of four, a child is capable of “walking in the shoes” of another person, which is a prerequisite for altruistic behaviour.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, a cross-cultural study involving American and Chinese children of 3-6 years of age showed that children “from both cultural groups exhibited similar overall trends in their ability to recognize other people’s emotional responses.” Even “very young children are capable of empathic responses.” The author writes,

The awareness of other people’s feelings by young children from very different cultural backgrounds suggests that empathy may be a basic human characteristic (Borke 1973:102).

With regard to primates, a recent study (Clay & De Waal 2013) shows that, across age and gender groups, after conflict situations bonobos console conspecific victims of aggression by offering stress-relieving affiliate behaviours such as embracing and touching. This orientation toward the other presupposes sensitivity to the other’s emotional state. Interestingly,

Juveniles were more likely to console than adults, challenging the assumption that comfort-giving rests on advanced cognitive mechanisms that emerge only with age ... sensitivity to the emotions

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8 In psychology emotional contagion is defined as the transfer of moods between people (e.g., Barsade, 2002).

9 See, e.g., Dadds *et al.* (2008:111-122 [with further literature]), and Hoffman (2000).

of others and the ability to provide appropriate consolatory behaviors emerges early in development (Clay & De Waal 2013).

Furthermore – and this will be important below – it was shown that subjects were more likely to console relatives and closely bonded companions than more distant conspecifics.

Thus, even in the animal realm altruistic behaviours exist. Another relatively recent study investigating chimpanzee behaviour confirms this result. Chimpanzees are capable of spontaneous acts of help and support even for conspecific *strangers* and – still more surprising – for *unknown humans*. They can spontaneously offer help independently of affiliation and familiarity, independently of reward scenarios and at times even at a cost for the helper. Altruism thus not only is rooted in the so-called “natural” human, but from an evolutionary point of view even deeper in common ancestors of humans and primates.<sup>10</sup>

## 2.2 Limits of the human capacity for altruism can be partly understood from endocrinological perspectives

Despite this optimistic perspective, humans nevertheless constantly encounter limits of their capacity for *agape*, especially when they are supposed to reach out in a loving way to people *beyond* their own social clan. This everyday experience can be partly understood from an endocrinological perspective.

Neuropeptides such as oxytocin until recently were celebrated as “love hormones.” But it is not that simple. Oxytocin, released by the brain’s hypothalamus, indeed furthers trust in others, monogamic bonding as well as cooperative and caring behaviour. Someone breathing oxytocin for a while develops a higher degree of loyalty toward one’s own group and behaves more socially toward group members compared to control subjects without oxytocin exposure. A finding like this provokes the uncomfortable question whether we still need culture or even religion to motivate loving behaviour, or whether chemistry and endocrinology are enough. The answer was given by two more recent studies in the *Proceedings of the Natural Academy of Sciences* and in the journal *Science*, showing that these hormones can only advance trust as well as caring and loving behaviour *within* one’s own group. In interactions

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10 See, e.g., Warneken *et al.* (2007). This study outdates contrary results from 2005 and 2006; see further Lampe (2011:29-36). For even mongooses caring for the weak in their own group, see already Rasa (1976:337-342).

with *external* persons, these hormones have a different, rather contrary effect. In external relations, the loyalty towards one's own group, fanned by the "love" hormones, has the effect that external persons are viewed with suspicion and distrustfulness.<sup>11</sup> Thus, culture, especially religion, *is* needed to advance a systematic – and not just spontaneous – altruism that reaches beyond one's own group boundaries.

Another study published in the journal *Hormones and Behavior* reaches a similar conclusion with regard to the hormone progesterone (Brown et al. 2009:108-111). Higher levels of progesterone correlate with social bonding, interhuman closeness and increased proneness to help somebody at one's own cost. But such altruism, correlating with an elevated progesterone level, does not really reach beyond group boundaries. The study shows that with newly established human bonds, the progesterone level is elevated while the partners interact, but they are not yet ready to sacrifice anything for the other in an altruistic way. This changes after just one week. Now increased progesterone correlates with a greater readiness to help the other at one's own cost and, if necessary, even to risk one's own life in order to help. This means, the more the new social partner is integrated into the radius of one's own group, the more one is prone to develop a selfless altruism toward this person. For persons outside this radius, such altruism is much less likely. From a biological-evolutionary point of view, selfless altruism *within* clan boundaries makes sense, because altruistic behaviour within the group strengthens it and in this way raises one's own quality of life and chance of surviving.

Thus, an endocrinological basis correlates with human readiness to put aside one's own interests in order to advance the wellbeing of another person. But this functions only within a group. Elevated levels of progesterone and oxytocin are incapable of moving us to act altruistically toward outsiders.

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11 Cf. De Dreu *et al.* (2010:1408-1411, and 2011). For human *pair* bonding in particular, the peptide hormones vasopressin and oxytocin are especially effective. They are released primarily during intercourse. Because the human penis has no callus points, intercourse can last longer, prolonging hormone release and thereby intensifying monogamic bonding. In this way, human groups, since the Neolithic Period at the latest, have had their centre in lasting monogamic pairs, in contrast to polygynous social structures of other primates. See Spitzer (2011 and 2010).

### 2.3 Altruism capacities inherent in the “natural” human, reach beyond these boundaries of one’s group on a larger scale only by means of human cultures

To sum up the scientific results, nature seems to have given us the capacity for *agape* behaviour within our clan already at birth. Spontaneously, this capacity for altruism can even transcend group boundaries.<sup>12</sup> Such spontaneous altruistic acts are independent of rewards and can even come at a cost for the helper. A Samaritan is capable of spontaneously helping an injured Jew at his own expense and without expecting anything back. This is modern science – and wisdom of a migrant prophet from Nazareth (Luke 10:25-37a[b]).

Thus, the positive *agape* capacity inherent in the “natural” human does not really promote universally oriented caring, affection or trust on a larger, more systematic scale. The evolutionary reason is obvious. Unlimited trust can put survival at risk, whereas caring and solidarity *within* a group have evolutionary advantages. Together, in a group, it is easier to live and survive.

Active love reaching beyond the group boundaries unfolds on a greater scale by means of human cultures only. For the greater part, universal altruism is a cultural achievement, to which religions have contributed the lion’s share. The culturally influential Sermon on the Mount, for example, opened up the group-oriented “natural” love that also “tax collectors” and “heathens” have for members of their in-groups by orienting this love beyond the group’s boundaries as far as the “enemies.” The Matthean Jesus underpins this attempt with a cultural, namely theological, concept, in this case with the concept of the Creator’s love for all creatures as a motivation for Christian behaviour (Matt 5:43-46).

Maybe we can formulate it in this way: Although it is within the potential of our genome to spontaneously develop group-transcending altruism, this genome can promote such altruism on a larger scale only indirectly: It enables us to develop brains that generate altruistic *cultures*. Within the realm of epigenetics (in the largest sense of this word), cultures unfold that can dissolve the clan boundaries of *agape* in a more systematic way. Dualistic thinking, “nature” versus “culture,” becomes obsolete with such an approach that combines genetics and epigenetics. Nature enables culture, which in turn *unfolds* aptitudes that were given to us as seeds at birth.

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12 In evolution, this aptitude has also enabled, e.g., occasional cooperation with other groups (for this, Lampe, 2011), which is advantageous for survival.

### 3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The problem of the first part of the Heidelberg Catechism seems to be that the fundamental misery of humans before God (after alienation from God in the Biblical Fall) is largely tied to their *moral* deficit, i.e., to their “complete” inability to love (Qu. 4-5) from which no human can escape without Christ. The wickedness of all humans after the Fall can bear no good fruit *at all* without Christ’s Spirit. Empirically, such a dogma has no basis. The theologoumenon of our fundamentally desperate situation before God needs to be unfolded with different emphases.

Today we are able to realize our misery before God without having to assume a principal wickedness within human “nature” after the Biblical Fall. Together with the Heidelberg Catechism, we can relate to the fact that cracks, fault lines and contradictions mark our existence. Our decisions are more dominated by our emotions than by rational thinking, as more recent neuroscientific studies show (see further, e.g., Gigrenzer 2008.). Biographical scars plague many of us as well as the loss of meaning in a rather chaotic and complicated world. Many are lonely – although surrounded by people. As a species, we mourn our incapacity to get a grip on the global problems that we created in the first place, problems that endanger more than just the survival of our own species. The sheer size of humanity renders us incapable of reaching a consensus on how to solve urgent global problems, and we despair of it, constantly approaching the ecological abyss. A cartoon recently toured the social networks, showing five monsters, among them the Grim Reaper and a little devil. In their speech balloons one could read: “After all the stories about us, how scary would it be to find out that the worst enemy of the world looks like that?” They are pointing at a smiling little man in a suit and tie with a briefcase under his arm. The cartoon is an expression of modern humans’ frustration with themselves. *This* is the forlornness of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We suffer from ourselves, being lost in our own eyes.

However, what’s more important, we are lost in the eyes of *God* because the little man with the tie, despite his self-doubts, made himself god, or at least a co-god, over creation. Moreover, he also worships third gods, for example, the god of “growth,” that is, the constantly growing portfolio in his briefcase, to which he brings his offerings as a self-purpose that he hardly ever questions. But God laughs at the Babylonian growth mania (Gen 11:1-19). The apostle Paul, in the beginning chapters of Romans, hits the nail on the head: It’s not *moral*s that are fundamentally wrong with natural humans. On the contrary, “Gentiles, who do not possess the (Jewish) law,” Paul writes, “*do* instinctively what the law requires. Though not having the law, they are a law to themselves, showing that what the law requires is

written on their hearts” (Rom 2:14f). Their fundamental problem is another one: they do not acknowledge and honour their Creator as God but instead elevate things from within the creation to the status of gods (Rom 1:19-23). *This* is the fundamental corruptness of humanity. Philippians 3:4-7 makes it even clearer: Even the morally excellent human, the one with a clean slate, fails if he or she does not open up to God in Christ. It is not a fundamental *moral* deficiency that makes salvation through Christ necessary, as Questions 10, 12-15 of the Heidelberg Catechism suggest (we have to “pay” for our “sinful deeds” which we cannot, so that Christ is needed). It is primarily our decision to be our own gods or to worship other modern idols and thereby not to respond to the sovereign God in a proper way, transgressing the first commandment. The Catechism acknowledges this (e.g., Qu. 5, 7, 9 and 11, cf. 94f), but then moves on to an overly strong emphasis of the moral corruptness of *all* humans who have not opened up to Christ’s salvation. A modern theological harmatology would have to focus primarily on the transgression of the first commandment, that is, on human beings’ alienation from God as *the* “sin”, not on moral “sins” in the plural (e.g., Qu. 1, 10<sup>13</sup>) in an unproportionally emphatic and empirically untenable way.

Admittedly, it would have been hard not to focus on moral corruptness when writing for unruly, naughty Heidelberg schoolboys in the 1560s. Furthermore, it would be anachronistic, presumptuous, and naïve – a hyena barking at the moon – to judge Ursinus’ catechism with criteria, e.g., modern scientific criteria, that he and his team did not have. Today there is still much we can take from the Heidelberg Catechism’s second and third parts. With respect to morality, for instance, we can accept the idea that our acting is relational on more than one level, that is, that it not only affects the inter-human level but that it is at the same time an essential part of our relationship to God.<sup>14</sup> But these considerations do not mean that we need to dispense with formulating our faith – based on the Bible – in dialogue with modern scientific thought in order to be able to reach out to secularized people who cannot identify with the harsh moral verdict about all non-Christian humans depicted in the catechism’s first part.

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13 “Sündige Taten”, Qu. 10.

14 Christian acting is summarized under the overarching aspect of “gratitude” to God in Questions 86-115; the Decalogue’s first commandment is emphasized in Qu. 94f; Matt 22:37f in Qu. 4. For the two levels, see, e.g., Mt 25:35f: Whatever one does to a fellow human, is done to God/Christ at the same time.

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**Trefwoorde**

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