

# Definitely dust, but also more

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What does the Lutheran systematic theologian from South Africa, Klaus Nürnberger, find 'ourselves to be', that is, what is his viewpoint on anthropology? Nürnberger has recently taken on the task of formulating anew his anthropological viewpoint in his two-volume *Faith in Christ today* (2016). I will focus on this publication as well as an earlier publication on anthropology, namely 'Dust of the ground and breath of life (Gn 2:7): The notion of "life" in ancient Israel and emergence theory' (2012). Having discussed his rich and broadly science-theology-defined anthropological viewpoint on 'what we find ourselves to be', only one dimension of 'more than dust' is critically engaged with, namely his understanding of the 'emotive' or 'affective' dimension of being human. From contemporary neuroscientific viewpoints on emotions as well as philosophical viewpoints on the layeredness of affectivity, I critically engage with Nürnberger's viewpoint.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** The question of being human (philosophical anthropology) is addressed within the context of the contemporary science-theology dialogues on anthropology. The critical question on the undervalued role of affectivity within Klaus Nürnberger's perspective is asked from insights from neuroscientific and philosophical viewpoints on emotions and affectivity.

Landscapes are culture before they are nature: constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock. (Schema 1996:7)

## Introduction

'To say the word *life*, is to invite interpretations'.<sup>1</sup> In accepting the invite, multivarious interpretative dimensions come into play. To name but two: It is to bring to the surface implicit knowledge interests that lie beneath or behind the question. It is to set up boundaries: life–non-life; biology–physics; animate–inanimate; life–death; life–survival.

The same eventuates in saying *anthropology*. Anthropology expresses our understandings of being human, personhood, of humaneness. Understandings that are simultaneously deeply entrenched in our understandings of life. Understandings that are formatted in the heuristic spirit of the words of the British art historian Simon Schama (1996):

Landscapes are culture before they are nature. (p. 7)

It implies that it is a given that every perspective on life, on anthropology are deeply and archaeologically woven together from contextual–historical–existential threads. This is a given for sense-making humans as persons of flesh and blood in the concreteness of life. And as the questions then spontaneously follow – to repeat but two: Which knowledge interests lie behind the question? What boundaries do we set up? – then we find that anthropological reflection in this qualified sense is 'culture before it is biology'.

However, it is culture in a very specific sense, namely (what I will call) participatory culture. Regarding participatory culture I have in mind a remark by the former German president Richard von Weizsaecker, who said that 'to research living beings, one has to participate in life' (quoted by Losch 2010:393). And this is very true of anthropological reflection – we are surely not disinterested enquirers but participants, and as participants, people of flesh and blood and contexts! As participants we are faced with an ongoing and never-ending task, as the Dutch philosopher Bas van Fraassen (2002) explains:

In every century again we must interpret ourselves to ourselves. We do not come into our century with a tabula rasa. We must interpret what we find ourselves to be, with an eye to what we have been and to what we could be and can be. This is the perennial, ever recurring task, ever new. What we find includes

<sup>1</sup>With these words the British sociologist Bronislaw Szerszynski opened his unpublished paper 'Life in the open air' in April 2012 at the ESSAT Conference in Tartu, Estonia.

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both science and religion, the secular and the spiritual, and what we transform in our reinterpretation includes the contrast and boundaries between these two. (p. vii)

What does the Lutheran systematic theologian from South Africa, Klaus Nürnberger, find ‘ourselves to be’ – a task that he has taken on in his recently published two-volume *Faith in Christ today* (2016)? It has the subtitle *Invitation to Systematic Theology*. I accept his invitation in focusing on his anthropological chapter in Vol. II, namely ‘The human being as creature of God’. I will also engage with an earlier-published document on anthropology, namely his ‘Dust of the ground and breath of life (Gn 2:7): The notion of “life” in ancient Israel and emergence theory’ (2012; 2014). Having discussed his anthropological ‘what we find ourselves to be’ findings, I would like to raise but one dimension of ‘more than dust’, namely the ‘emotive’ or ‘affective’, which I find to be glanced over ever so lightly. From contemporary neuroscientific viewpoints on emotions as well as philosophical viewpoints on the layeredness of affectivity, I critically engage with Nürnberger’s viewpoint.

## Nürnberger’s approach and stance

### Approach

For Nürnberger (2016:120; cf. 2011), the world that we are experiencing is a product of the creative power of God. It is the natural sciences that provide us with the most credible picture of how reality is put together. To get a glimpse of the reality of the human being as a product of cosmic history we have to make use of the resources of contemporary sciences. In general terms, he captures his vantage point as follows: Faith needs science to be credible; science needs faith to be responsible (see Nürnberger 2011). In this sense, scientific insights become theological insights.

### Stance

How then does he understand being human as a product of cosmic history? He informatively states (Nürnberger 2016):

To get a glimpse of the reality of the human being as a product of cosmic history, we again make use of the resources of contemporary sciences rather than the intuitions and metaphors of pre-scientific traditions, which may no longer be as plausible and relevant as they use to be in ancient times. (p. 120)

The broad outlines of his anthropological stance can be summarised in the following statements (see Nürnberger 2016:120–168):

- The human being is a unique creature of God (120ff).
- Humans are biological animals and as such part of the universe (122ff). As part of the universe, they display the following characteristics:
  - They have limited lifetimes, occupy limited spaces and draw from limited energy reserves (122).
  - They are subject to the sequence of emergence, unfolding, deterioration and decay (122).
  - They come into existence through a vast network of causes and leave behind a vast network of consequences (122).
  - Their bodies are composed of amino acid-forming cells coordinated by an intricate informative system (123ff)

consisting of two essential channels of communication, namely emotive and motor systems, that are coupled by multiple feedback loops (124).

- The body (124) is controlled by chemicals that lead to attraction or aversion that enable it to maintain internal stability (homoeostasis).
- The brain (125) forms the command centre of the organism. Its complex composition and function forms the infrastructure of the mind and its extraordinary capacities. The reptile brain (125–126) is the location of survival instincts, the limbic system (situated between instinct and intelligence) caters for emotions and the prefrontal cortex (the seat of abstract thought, symbolic representations, language, etc.) is responsible for rational assessments and decisions (126).
- The mind (127) represents structured and oriented consciousness:
  - It is a level of emergence located high up in the hierarchy of emergences (127).
  - The mind cannot exist and function without the infrastructure of the biological body (128–132).
  - Subjective experiences come about through chemical substances released into the body by the brain in response to certain stimuli (132ff).
  - There are various levels of reactions to the outside world (134ff) and various levels of consciousness (such as memory, verbal communication).
- Intentionality and agency (142ff):
  - Humans are programmed to deal with a reality that is in flux. We remember the past, we anticipate the future and engage with a constantly changing present (143). In every current situation there are alternative potential futures available (143). When we take a decision, we opt for one of them (Klaus calls these decisions ‘switches’ that lead the world process into a new direction, 142).
- Freedom and responsibility (146ff):
  - Humans need a system of meaning that offers spiritual stability and orientation.
  - Systems of meaning define identity within the whole, set up criteria of acceptability and belonging, and grant authority in the forms of mandates, statuses and roles. In this way they provide the values and ethical guidelines characteristic of a particular culture (152ff).
- Different systems of meaning have differential consequences (154ff):
  - They can be beneficial, detrimental, even catastrophic.
  - An appropriate system of meaning will have universal horizons and include all kinds of needs (163ff).

To conclude, Nürnberger (2016) ties the threads of significance of human beings as a product of cosmic history together in the following evaluative conclusion:

Our past-oriented Christian traditions are no longer capable of responding adequately to the needs of a rapidly unfolding future. The evolution of human consciousness accelerates relentlessly, becoming more differentiated, complex and unmanageable. It is difficult to keep abreast; it is much easier to withdraw into our traditional symbolic universes and to enjoy whatever we can get out of our lives. But unless we embrace this new level of emergence, we will endanger everything that evolution has brought about over the last four billion years. (p. 166)

In an earlier publication, ‘Dust of the ground and breath of life (Gn 2:7): The notion of “life” in ancient Israel and emergence theory’ (2012; 2014), Nürnberger turns his scientific insights into more elaborate theological insights. He insightfully compares the notion of life (and subsequently anthropology) in terms of ancient Israelite religion and modern emergence theory. For him the prescientific views do not clash with the theory of emergence. He pursues and explicates an integrated best science–best theological insights understanding of life that is ‘more-than-the-purely-physical’. Life is a mysterious gift of God. But how is this to be understood? Taking emergence theory as his vantage point, he states that it is able to throw light on the more realistic Israelite concept of life as a *process* involving structured matter. And as structured matter, it is determined by the constraints of time, space and energy.<sup>2</sup>

In his exposition of the concept of life in ancient Israel, Nürnberger (2012:147) firstly turns to the most basic religious belief about life, namely life understood as a mysterious gift of God. As a gift of God, the Genesis stories relate its mysterious origin to a very specific act of God. What is that specific act of God? God formed a human being from the soil of the field like a potter and then breathed the breath of life into ‘his’ nostrils. In this way the human being became ‘a living creature’ (Nürnberger 2012:147). For Nürnberger, these formulations within the context of everyday life in ancient Israel can today be reformulated or articulated anew within the context of modern science (cf. Nürnberger 2012:147). And this is what he subsequently explicates – in my opinion – in an insightful, integrated manner. The structured ‘soil of the field’ is according to him constituted by ‘energy conglomerations’, organised in a staggered hierarchy of emergences. The scientific equivalent of the ‘divine breath of life’ consists of matter of organisation and information systems that presuppose all lower levels of emergence. However, it represents a superior level of complexity, volatility and potentiality. At some evolutionary stage – he continues – ‘autocatalytic processes kick in’. They produce trillions of complex systems that function in perfect coordination. That is truly a mysterious gift of God (Nürnberger 2012:148). However, this intricately organised conglomeration of systems is highly vulnerable. Should anything go wrong or fail, it can eventually lead to the end of the organism.

Of specific interest to me is Nürnberger’s (2012:148–150) subsequent, more detailed exposition of the experience of human life, which is characterised as complex and multidimensional. Nürnberger (2012:148–150) utilises four Hebrew concepts, namely *nephesh*, *basar*, *ruah* and *leb*. He reformulates them in the following manner:

- *Nephesh*, that is, the throat or trachea, is translated as ‘soul’ (cf. Nürnberger (2012:148)). It can scientifically be reformulated as a ‘living creature’, thus as ‘human person’, specifically as the *needy* human being, or in its widest sense, as life itself. He elaborates, however, on its spiritual dimension, namely

that the person – as believer – can praise Yahweh for satisfying the hungry, thirsty, languishing or ‘breathless’ organism. However, the very same person that praises Yahweh is the person who experiences dependence, vulnerability and suffering: fear, fright, weakness, defencelessness, exhaustion, worry, anger, love, hatred, sorrow, impatience, but also satisfaction, joy, jubilation (Nürnberger 2012:148). He links this interpretatively with the neural and chemical processes meant to lead to homeostasis, without which a healthy and pleasant life is not possible.

- *Basar*, that is, meat (of a sacrificial animal) or flesh (part of the body), is translated as ‘flesh’. It can be reformulated as the ‘*frail* human being’. Nürnberger (2012:149) explains that the meaning is extended from here to the human body as a whole but then also further to include blood relations, the clan, fellow human beings and ultimately humanity.
- *Ruah*, that is, wind or storm, is translated as ‘spirit’ or ‘breath’ (cf. Nürnberger 2012:149). It can be reformulated in contemporary terminology as the *empowered* human being, or scientifically as life-giving energy. It is very often used as a metaphoric description of God, denoting the power of God. Less often it is used to contrast being human to God, that is, to emphasise humans’ creaturely frailty. As life-giving energy, it is explicated by Nürnberger (2012:149) as consciousness as understood within the realm of emergence theory, that is, the combination of emotional strength situated in the limbic system with the orientation and determination emanating from the prefrontal cortex. Its negative version can be compared with the egotistic survival instincts that have emancipated themselves from the control of the latter (Nürnberger 2012:149).
- *Leb* (*lebab*), that is, heart, is translated as ‘heart’ but reformulated as the *rational* human being (and not as an organ that pumps blood). In distinction to the reformulated *ruah* as life-giving energy, indicated in the previous paragraph, *leb* is more closely scientifically explicated by Nürnberger (2012:149–150) as representing human consciousness (insight, rationality, knowledge, thought, attention, interest and memory) and the human person as responsible person. Interestingly, Nürnberger (2012:149–150) argues emphatically that *leb* has nothing to do with either the biological organ that pumps blood through our bodies or the emotional sensitivity that we connect with the concept of the ‘heart’. It is believed to be something deeply hidden somewhere ‘within’ the human being, probably inside the chest. If then scientifically reformulated in emergence terms, it represents systems of synaptic switches that are formed by descent, early childhood socialisation, ongoing experience and continuing information (cf. Nürnberger 2012:150).

What do we make of the anthropological landscape that Nürnberger presents us with from these two texts? I turn to a few critical remarks in the following conclusion.

## Dust, but definitely affective-cognitively more

It is not possible to respond to the scientific width with which Nürnberger (2012:147) has explored, unpacked and

<sup>2</sup>For Nürnberger (2012:146) this does not eliminate the difference between the scientific view of reality from within immanent reality and the believer’s view of the same reality from a transcendent perspective.

reformulated his understanding of being human as a product of cosmic history. It is impressive and very original. There are simply too many diverse dimensions that he has descriptively woven and interwoven into his detailed anthropological viewpoint from scientific insights. I very much like and share in much of his explorative movement from scientific insights to theological insights in expounding the 'more than the purely physical' of the human being as a unique creature of God. The latter I would like to formulate differently: Dust, but definitely more. With this statement, Nürnberger will surely agree. Where our viewpoints may part ways is on one specific dimension of the 'more'.

I would like to raise but one – and to me very important – dimension of 'more than dust', namely the 'emotive' or 'affective', which I find to be glanced over too lightly. Given the contemporary influential viewpoint on consciousness and newly formulated anthropological insights from paleo-anthropology, I raise my affective eyebrows at his viewpoint on emotions.

He stated in *Faith in Christ today* (cf. Nürnberger 2016):

The reptile brain is the location of survival instincts, the limbic system (situated between instinct and intelligence) caters for emotions and the prefrontal cortex (the seat of abstract thought, symbolic representations, language etc.) is responsible for rational assessments and decisions. (p. 126)

Also in the text 'Dust of the ground and breath of life' (cf. Nürnberger 2012):

*Leb* (*lebab*) translated as 'heart', represents the rational human being. (pp. 149–150)

*Leb* is interestingly explained as representing human consciousness (insight, rationality, knowledge, thought, attention, interest and memory) and the human person as responsible person. The affective in his description of *leb* is compartmentalised and subsequently politely pushed to the background. The same applies for his neat description of *ruuh*, which is in emergent terms described as 'emotional strength situated in the limbic system exposition'. And then not an affective word further. The affective dimension is not given any 'second thoughts' or seen as of any argumentative importance to develop any further. In my opinion, this represents a serious shortcoming in our making sense of being human, of personhood. It is the very constitutive dimension of affectivity – and then specifically the affective–cognitive dimension – that we have to interpretively pursue to broaden and deepen our understanding of human beings as a product of cosmic history. It is to scientifically–theologically enrich our anthropological landscapes of 'what we find ourselves to be'. Let me explain.

In the most influential hermeneutical–theological discourses worldwide, the theory-ladenness of all experience is acknowledged (cf. Van Huyssteen 1998, 1999). In Nürnberger's (2012:147) call that we should 'embrace' the new anthropological level of emergence, the one dimension

that I would embracingly emphasise, because of its deep and wide-ranging importance, will be the dimension of the *affective* – in short, what I will call the 'affective-ladenness' of all experience (not only the theory-ladenness) and thus of rationality. I am convinced that in the 'mind-heart' (affective–cognitive dimension and thus the affective-theory-ladenness of all experience), we find a constitutive dimension of being human as a product of cosmic history that is responsible for the very survival of those 'human beings' and their history. I have in mind the neuroscientific viewpoints on affectivity (and emotion) by – to name but two – the American neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux and the Portuguese–American neurobiologist Antonio Damasio.<sup>3</sup>

As vantage point I would like to make evolutionary sense of the gripping words of the French philosopher Pascal (1958:78): 'The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know...'. And: 'It is the heart which experiences God, and not the reason. This, then, is faith: God felt by the heart, not by the reason' (Pascal 1958:79). Pascal's words make very much sense from evolutionary biological perspectives. We are biologically woven together in such a manner (neurons and blood) that we make sense of being human in affective–cognitively determined 'landscapes' (to use Schama's remark again). To cite but one important remark by LeDoux (1966):

... [P]eople normally do all sorts of things for reasons they are not consciously aware of (because the behaviour is produced by brain systems that operate unconsciously) and ... one of the main jobs of consciousness is to keep our life tied together into a coherent story, a self-concept. (p. 33)

Also for Damasio, emotion and rationality go together. He adamantly remarks (Damasio 1999):

Of the 'feeling of what happens' as self-consciousness, emotion constitutes '... a support system without which the edifice of reason cannot operate properly'. (p. 42)

For Damasio, emotions are defined as patterns of chemical and neural responses, the function of which is to assist the organism in maintaining life by prompting adaptive behaviours. He insightfully summarises (Damasio 1999):

All emotions use the body as theatre ... but emotions also effect the mode of operation of numerous brain circuits: the variety of the emotional responses is responsible for profound changes in both the body landscape and the brain landscape. The collection of these changes constitutes the substrate for the neural patterns which eventually become feelings of emotions. (pp. 51–2)

From these brief remarks, I am proposing that the affective-ladenness – and not only the theory-ladenness – of all experience can be argumentatively justified. From an existential–experiential perspective, I would formulate it simply as follows: In the spelling-out (i.e. sense-making) of 'what we find ourselves to be', that is, our understandings of being human (as creatures operating from neurons and blood), the consonants are represented by the cognitive

<sup>3</sup>For a more comprehensive discussion of the contributions of LeDoux and Damasio, see Veldsman (2014).

dimension, whereas the vowels are represented by the affective dimension. Only with the two dimensions ‘together’ (i.e. glued as one) do we have meaningful realisations of ‘what we find ourselves to be’.

At this argumentative point an extremely in-between critical philosophical question should be posed specifically regarding the preceding characterisation of being ‘responsible’ in our sense-making. Are we not undermining just that of being responsible by reintroducing the ‘heart’ on our landscape of rationality? My stronger emphasis on the affective dimension is not to undermine rationality but has a twofold objective: firstly, to criticise reductionistic viewpoints on rationality and at the same time, secondly, to present a far richer, deeper understanding of rationality. Viewpoints on rationality should include and integrate ‘feelings’ (and that includes emotions). However, such an integrated inclusion of emotions as part and parcel of our viewpoints on rationality, must critically revisit and revise influential viewpoints on emotions that are reductionist in nature, and therefore not compatible with contemporary neuroscientific discourses (e.g. those of LeDoux and Damasio that were cited earlier). My protest is directed towards reductionistic understandings of emotions, and consequently of rationality. We find within the context of evolutionary biology far richer, broader and deeper viewpoints on being human and personhood, within which exciting new insights on the integrated composition of affectivity and cognitivity have emerged, rooted in our biological nature. And to the foregoing, I would like to add the viewpoint of the Austrian philosopher Stephan Strasser on layered affectivity as discussed and religiously broadened by the Dutch science of religion philosopher Wessel Stoker.

In his English-translated *Is faith rational?* (2006), Stoker makes use of Strasser’s viewpoint on the layeredness of affectivity in his exposition of religious affectivity. Stoker (2006:178ff) argues that mood (or disposition) precedes emotion. Adding a Heideggerian flavour, he continues that mood discloses our existence, that is, ‘our thrownness in existence’ (Stoker 2006:180). For Stoker, mood represents – as pure feeling – our ‘finding of being in the world’, or a ‘felt state of mind, pure being-in-the-mood’ (Strasser quoted by Stoker 2006:180). And with a final qualified touch from the German systematic theologian Paul Tillich, he states that it is a property of our humanness that expresses our belonging to being. He explains (Stoker 2006):

This feeling of belonging to being is the ontological feeling. Just like a psychological feeling, it is affectively charged but differs from the former in that it indicates a property of our humanness: our connection with our (life) world. It is a basic feeling of the human being. (p. 181)

And finally (Stoker 2006):

Not only emotion but also mood influences our rational thought and our behaviour. The human being is a whole of *bios, pathos*

and *logos*. Viewing affectivity as layered is an attempt to do justice to the different aspects of our humanness. (p. 179)

In my opinion, the preceding neuroscientific viewpoints on emotions, the layeredness of affectivity and its integrated nature with rationality, critically addresses any reductionistic viewpoints on rationality. I can fully agree with Stoker (cf. 2006:179) when he almost poetically states that mood (feelings of belonging) and emotions converge with knowledge and action in the human heart. Feeling internalises knowledge and personalises reason. Thus: the heart unites what knowledge separates (Stoker 2006:184). The heart – and here I put a much stronger emphasis on emotions than we find in Nürnberger’s exposition – represents the seat of knowledge and *affectivity*.

To conclude: There is a wonderful explorative richness to the contemporary anthropological scientific translation and invitation that stems from Nürnberger’s viewpoint on the human being as the product of cosmic history. In my mind-heart, his discussion presents us with an exciting science-theology richness that opens up many new interpretative horizons. I will pursue and embrace the new levels of emergence – as Nürnberger passionately pleads for – from the basic condition that we are dust but at the very same anthropological time that we are definitely more than dust with the much stronger emphasis on the mind-hearts in the realisation of ‘what we find ourselves to be’ with all life on Earth before God.

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