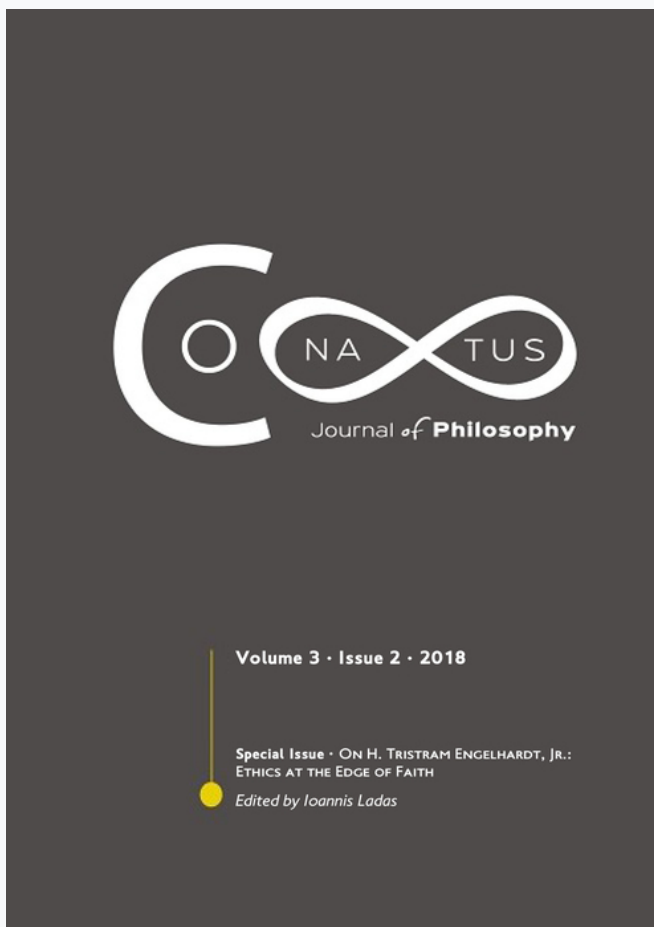


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Meeting and Working with H.T. Engelhardt Jr.: An Inspiring Experience for a (once young) European Scholar

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Meeting and Working with H.T. Engelhardt Jr.: An Inspiring Experience for a (once young) European Scholar

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Abstract

The author – a European “companion” of H. T. Engelhardt during the two last decades of the 20th century – describes his meetings with and impressions of Tris Engelhardt. He clarifies how open mindedness was the main concern in their common activities.

Key-words: *H. T. Engelhardt, obituary, crazy universe, social security system, Christianity*

This narrative is a purely personal obituary to Tris Engelhardt. I do hope it might be insightful for non-Europeans to read what kind of impression he could make on a – at that time, young – scholar in the Western European Bioethics scene (in casu: Belgium).

I will first contextualize my meetings with Tris: the KU Leuven (Catholic University of Leuven) decided in 1980 to create a separate academic chair for Medical Ethics inside the School of Medicine. The Centre for Biomedical Ethics and Law was opened in 1986 (starting with an honorary degree for the Georgetown professor of Moral Theology, Richard A. McCormick). In light of many emerging technologies in medicine, the intention was to collaborate with other Catholic Universities and with Schools of Medicine inside these Universities. The International Federation of Catholic Universities created therefore a separate group for representatives of University Hospitals.

After my nomination in 1984, I therefore quickly received an invitation to share that group and to become an active member of it. I was at that moment a young scholar, only 34 years old, and supposed to learn from the real masters, like John Collins Harvey and Edmund Pellegrino (Georgetown), Francesc Abel (Barcelona), John Mahoney (London), Patrick Verspieren (Paris), Edouard Boné (Brussels) and Maurice de Wachter (Montreal, Maastricht). The publication of the Roman Instruction on reproductive medicine in 1987, *Donum Vitae*, strengthened the decision to collaborate, share ideas and promote dialogue with the Magisterium.

Almost out of the blue the group was joined by a scholar with a great reputation already in Bioethics, namely H. T. Engelhardt (having published his *Foundations of Bioethics* in 1986). He joined several meetings, spoke at conferences (e.g. Barcelona) and other informal sessions. He challenged continuously taken-for-granted opinions. His presence functioned as a continuous disruption of the dialogue, even in such a way that the group finally decided not to invite him to their meetings (in order to make progress in their real task, writing opinions for Church Leaders).

In any way, I felt like meeting someone with great intelligence, but unfortunately, also without any constructivism to make a dialogue going on. I even was anxious meeting him and trying to start a dialogue with him. Ana Smith Iltis describes this as the “crazy universe” (p. 257).¹ We were shocked by the way he interacted with his personal collaborators and *doctorandi*, calling them “slaves”. He also shared with us his so-called “Texan” ideas on property and – gun-loaded – defense of it. He was extremely religious (even highly conservative) and at the same time extremely secular ... indeed, a “crazy universe”, leaving us in total confusion.

It was therefore an enormous surprise for me to be invited to share a research project on “Allocating Scarce Medical Resources. Roman Catholic Perspectives.”² The purpose of the project (1997-2002) was to share – from different belief systems inside the religious context in general and the Roman Catholic Church in particular – our views on how to approach the upcoming reality of scarce medical resources. The first meeting took place in Liechtenstein (sic), ending the weekend with the shocking news on the death of Lady Diana (August 31, 1997). We met several times at Baylor College in Houston. The last meeting took place nearby Dublin, where representatives of several denominations were invited to make their final contribution, of course with the necessary moments of joyful sharing the fruits of life (whisky tasting etc.).

Eminent scholars were invited, to name some of them: Kevin Wildes, Joseph Boyle, George Khushf, M. Cathleen Kaveny, and others. There were not many Europeans present, except Ludger Honnefelder (Bonn, Germany) and Josef Seifert (an Austrian philosopher, inspired by Dietrich von Hildebrand, working in Texas, later in Chile). The difference of opinions of Honnefelder and myself with those of Tris could not be greater. In any case, I was regularly accused of defending a communist system: I tried to make clear that Christianity was at the basis of one of the greatest achievements in society, namely the creation of a democratic social security system in Western Europe (“Equal Care as the Best of Care. A Personalist Approach”, was finally my contribution to the book). Afterwards, observing the debate in the USA on the Obama Health Care Plan, I understood how difficult it must have been for him

¹ Lisa M. Rasmusen, Ana Smith Iltis & Mark J. Cherry (eds.), “At the Foundations of Bioethics and Biopolitics: Critical Essays on the Thought of H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr.,” *Philosophy and Medicine* 125 (2015): 1-275.

² H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. & Mark J. Cherry (eds.), *Allocating Scarce Medical Resources. Roman Catholic Perspectives* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 331.

to really “understand” the solidarity based health care system in Western Europe. I could not convince him and finally did not meet him any more since the end of our project meetings.

However, here I discovered what so many students of Tris describe: he was a charming host, being concerned about the wellbeing of all the members of the project group, taking care of providing a creative interchange, and finally, also publishing an excellent book with inspiring contributions. Therefore, I now can testify that my meetings with Tris opened my mind ... and is that not what we all should realize in our life?

References

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Rasmusen, Lisa, Smith Iltis, Ana & Cherry, Mark (eds.). “At the Foundations of Bioethics and Biopolitics: Critical Essays on the Thought of H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr.”. *Philosophy and Medicine* 125 (2015): 1-275.

