

"This miracle age of organ transplants and other forms of  
therapeutic vivisection":  
Medicine and Medical Ethics in Kurt Vonnegut's Work  
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In his novel *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) Kurt Vonnegut envisions the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1979 to be awarded to his picaresque antihero Kilgore Trout. The widely unknown and largely unappreciated pulp science fiction writer Trout receives the prize in the medical category "for demonstrating how ideas (the stuff of fiction) have a physical impact on the nature of human life" (Klinkowitz 111). Vonnegut is thus symbolically emphasizing the strong healing power of literature. Against the "nomination" of this somewhat unusual candidate, Stockholm's Karolinska Institute at that time decided differently but finally equally adequate. Allan Cormack and Sir Godfrey Hounsfield received the "Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine" for their development of computer tomography, a radiological method which allows three-dimensional cross-sectional images of internal bodily structures – on a metaphoric level, we might say, literature does something similar.

However, we do not only encounter a veritable Nobel Prize winner in the Vonnegut universe. In his landmark study *Sanity Plea*, Lawrence Broer observed that "[p]robably no characters in contemporary fiction are more traumatized and emotionally damaged than those of Kurt Vonnegut" (3).<sup>1</sup> The topic of deteriorating ill-

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<sup>1</sup> Broer interprets Vonnegut's artistic purpose to be a healer: Vonnegut ritualistically acts as society's "shaman", "a kind of spiritual medicine man whose function is to expose these various forms of societal madness – dispelling the evil spirits of irresponsible mechanization and aggression while encouraging reflectiveness and the will to positive social change" (4). Vonnegut is thus metaphorically elevated to the status of a "physician" who warns mankind of the consequences of its risky and unhealthy behavior and tries to "offer" a remedy with his writings and speeches; e.g. in his 1985 address at the MIT he warned the future scientists of the dangers inherent in science and technology and reminded them of their responsibilities by imploring the students to rewrite the Hippocratic Oath for all scientists.

To process the horrifying experiences of the Dresden bombing, the writing of the metafictional "telegraphic-schizophrenic" novel *Slaughterhouse Five* clearly possessed for Vonnegut an auto-therapeutic function. He confirmed this in an interview with the *Playboy* magazine:

"Playboy: So your books have been a therapy for yourself?

Vonnegut: Sure. That's well known. Writers get a nice break in one way, at least: They can treat their mental illnesses every day. If I'm lucky, the books have amounted to more than that. I'd like to be a useful citizen, a specialized cell in the body politic. I have a feeling that *Breakfast* will be the last of the therapeutic books, which is probably too bad. Crazy makes for some beautiful accidents in art" (Standish 109).

health, serious diseases, and massive traumatization, however, goes way beyond the characters' mental sufferings. Almost all of his protagonists suffer from physical diseases of some sort or happen to have tragic accidents that require medical care and hospitalization. Vonnegut repeatedly portrays disease, suffering, pain, therapies, hospitals, doctors and nurses. Consequently, as illnesses, "the night-side of life" (3) as Susan Sontag tersely termed it, become the signature of their times and represent symbolically the symptoms of crisis, Vonnegut raises important ethical questions connected with modern medicine, e.g. after the logic of doctor-patient relations, anonymization, assisted suicide, organ transplants, genetics, or high-tech medicine, thus providing insights into the general human condition.

In a first step I will show the importance of medicine and of medical personnel in Vonnegut's writings in general before I will exemplarily outline some of the medical-ethical dimensions in his short play "Fortitude". In this (screen-) play medicine functions as a symbolic system for the deficits of a modernization focusing largely on technological and economic progress instead of focusing on humanity, human life and dignity. Vonnegut's criticism of the blind worship of technology and the equally naïve believe in "progress" finally contains also a creative and regenerative potential for a renewal of language, cognition, and the ethical system of society.

Apart from issues of schizophrenia and other forms of mental illnesses the subject of "medicine" hasn't been very much in the focus of Vonnegut studies yet.<sup>2</sup> However, it attracted some interest in medical journals, but even there it's often mentioned only en passant to illustrate an argument or to investigate the role and relevance of literature for the studies of medicine.<sup>3</sup>

With the notable exceptions of the short stories "Adam," "Welcome to the Monkey House," and "Unknown Soldier," the short play "Fortitude", or the collection of fictional interviews in *God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian*, medicine is rarely the

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<sup>2</sup> The problematic mental states and psychic sufferings of the Vonnegut characters have already been the focus of critical attention among scholars of literature; cf. e.g. Broer; Veas-Gulani; or also Cacicedo. I will concentrate mainly on the numerous physical sufferings – though they go often hand-in-hand with mental illnesses – and the system of medicine as a whole.

<sup>3</sup> To give but a few examples: While Friedman is only using a famous quotation from *Slaughterhouse Five* as an apt metaphor to examine the current status of medical teaching, Gorovitz in an "open peer commentary" uses "Fortitude" to aptly illustrate his argument about justice in the health care system; Lancaster et al. describe a special study module at the University of Oxford where a med-school students production of "Fortitude" was used to discuss the relationship between literature and medicine and to develop thus skills beyond the medical core curriculum; Rabkin as well as Klugman and later also Pomidor discuss the relevance of different sci-fi literature to the study, practice, and current reality of medicine; Kitson discusses the depiction of nurses and nursing in literature, using "Welcome to the Monkey House" as a prime example for a caricature of the profession; and finally von Engelhardt mentions *Cat's Cradle* as an example in his medical-cultural history of cancer.

thematical focal point in Vonnegut's works. Nevertheless, it is almost always an integral part of his texts as well as of those by his fictional alter ego Kilgore Trout.<sup>4</sup>

Medical metaphors, like in the title of this paper (from the "Preface" to *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloon*), wherein Vonnegut refers to his work as being literally dissected by critics abound in his writings; ambulance like "Martha" in *Breakfast of Champions* chase through most novels and thus possess a function as leitmotifs.

Some of his major characters are professional physicians like *Slapstick's* Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain or Dr. Norbert Woodyly in "Happy Birthday, Wanda June", or they were at least once (unsuccessful) med-students like *Cat's Cradle's* Newt Hoenikker. But also some of the minor characters are from the medical profession like the non-caring Dr. Miasma in *Breakfast of Champions* or Dr. Teodoro Donoso in *Galapagos*.<sup>5</sup> None of them, however, is ever an adorable "demi-God in White" like those from TV's soaps. As it is with almost all scientists in Vonnegut, also the role of medical people is highly ambivalent; some are often impenetrable and obscure characters with their every emotion hidden beneath a tight "teflon-coated" (Kathryn Hume) surface while some others do indeed inspire confidence – and some are both at the same time.

In *Mother Night* we do not only encounter the reclusive Auschwitz survivor Dr. Epstein to whom Campbell finally surrenders. There is also the bigot and racial agitator Reverend Dr. Lionel Jason David Jones, probably modeled after Hiram Wesley Evans, who was once the Ku Klux Klan's "Imperial Wizard" – Jones and Evans were both drop outs from dental school, yet continued to practice dentistry without holding a proper medical degree. In Dr. Jones, who pursues a racist theory regarding the degenerative status of teeth, but also in *Cat's Cradle's* Dr. Schlichter von Koenigswald we come across "eugenics". This "social movement" is an important part of the medical history and ethics in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in its most nightmarish version it became the core tenet behind the bio-political doctrine of the Third Reich and resulted in the Shoah. Von Koenigswald, once a "Doctor Death"

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<sup>4</sup>In the Trout story "Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension" interspersed in *Slaughterhouse Five* incurable diseases are diagnosable only in the fourth dimension "where treatments must wait until physicians from our own 3-D world can cross the barrier and do their work to make the patients better" (Klinkowitz 89). In Trout's "Dog's Breakfast" in *Time Quake*, Dr. Fleon Sunoco develops a birth control pill "that takes all the pleasure out of sex, so that teenagers won't copulate" (107) while secretly Sunoco is dissecting brains of high-IQ-people in search of little transplanted radios.

<sup>5</sup> One should note, of course, that not always a field of specialization is given for the mass of doctors in Vonnegut's texts; among the many physicians are also dentists and veterinarians aplenty.

at Auschwitz, now does penance in San Lorenzo's jungle hospital, finally leading the concept of penance grotesquely ad absurdum. Julian Castle sarcastically remarks: "If he keeps going at his present rate, working night and day, the number of people he's saved will equal the number of people he let die – in the year 3010" (186f). As a scientist, however, von Koenigswald is attributed with positive connotations. He's devotedly concerned with bettering the human condition even if it's unscientific, thus he's attempting to reconcile science with humanity.<sup>6</sup>

Vonnegut's dystopian short story "Welcome to the Monkey House" employs stereotypic caricatures of nurses, satirically called "hostesses" who are "manipulative, seductive, coercive individuals, trained in the techniques of caring but programmed to carry out definite tasks [to] upheld the values of the ruling party" (Kitson 1647). In this Orwellian-like story nursing has become a dehumanising and demoralizing work of total control and of lethal destruction; the "suicide hostesses" are mere agents of an advanced technology and pharmacy to carry out the prudish demands and dubious moral impetus of the government. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, however, we encounter Mary O'Hare to whom the novel is dedicated. As a trained nurse she is literally also "nurturing" Vonnegut's then fledgling novel by making him promise that it won't turn into another heroic war time tale.

In Vonnegut hospitals function as symbolic representations *in nuce* of the world itself. Often they are portrayed as inhumane institutions where people are treated without human dignity or as mere guinea pigs, being at the mercy of incompetent doctors and overworked nurses; e.g. in *Breakfast of Champions* we witness the lonely death of Mary Young in the Midland City hospital (cf. 63f) while Rudy Waltz's father in *Deadeye Dick* becomes a helpless test object for the Midland City physicians (cf. 186f). On the other hand we do also encounter institutions like the "House of Hope and Mercy" in *Cat's Cradle*, modelled after Albert Schweitzer's Lambaréné Hospital (cf. 170f) or Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain's hospital for children in his Vermont home in *Slapstick* (cf. 162).

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<sup>6</sup> cf. Streier 160. In privileging practical humanity over abstract science Dr. von Koenigswald is similar to the philanthropist founder of San Lorenzo's jungle hospital, the "House of Hope and Mercy", Julian Castle in the same novel. Castle, a sneering nihilist, nevertheless assumes responsibility for the island's poor, and admits that the officially forbidden, un-scientific pseudo-religion "boku-maru" is practiced in his hospital alongside the scientifically proven standards of Western medicine: "It works. I'm grateful for things that work. Not many things *do* work, you know. [...] I couldn't possibly run that hospital of mine if it weren't for aspirin and *boku-maru*" (171). Von Koenigswald and Castle thus both question the absoluteness of the scientific-medical truth claim.

Vonnegut's patients visit constantly doctors and hospitals, or seek the assistance of technical devices like *Galapagos'* "Mandarax", a machine designed "to diagnose with respectable accuracy one thousand of the most common diseases" (*Galapagos* 57); despite this incredible power Mandarax is *in praxi* a completely useless gadget.

In *Deadeye Dick* there are Darvon, Ritalin, Valium, and amphetamine galore; in "Happy Birthday, Wanda June" there is the mystical "blue soup", consumed to relax and to reduce stress; in "Welcome to the Monkey House" the state-prescribed "ethical birth pill" stops all sexual desires from the waist downward; in "Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow" the "anti-gerasone" pills prevent the effects of aging; and in *Slapstick* "Deportamil" is taken to treat "the socially unacceptable symptoms of Tourette's Disease" (176).

Patients take medicine and pills not only to cure their diseases and ailments, but also to make the harsh realities of the world more tolerable. Since Vonnegut's characters are "at odds with the worlds they inhabit" and prefer illusions over reality, "[d]rugs are means of escape, of forgetting, and they oppose the life-affirming creation of narrative" (Gholson 141). All of these "therapeutic remedies" are of easy availability and everyday normal presence, so that drug addiction becomes a normal condition. In *Deadeye Dick* the narrator, the pharmacist Rudy Waltz, can state that "[t]he late twentieth century will go down in history [...] as an era of pharmaceutical buffoonery" (216).<sup>7</sup>

The list of diseases and ailments the Vonnegut characters suffer from is long: pneumonia, heart attacks, kidney failure, genetic defects (like *retinitis pigmentosa*), Huntington's chorea, removed organs, echolalia, syphilis, (illegal) abortion, food poisoning, osteoporosis, dementia praecox, Alzheimer's Disease, tetanus infection, or paranoia. There are epidemics like the bubonic plague and AIDS, but also the bout of infertility in *Galapagos* and the mysterious "Green Death" and the "Albanian Flue" in *Slapstick*.

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<sup>7</sup> Asked in the *Playboy* interview for his own experiences with drugs Vonnegut stated: "No – although I did get into the prescribed-amphetamines thing because I was sleeping a lot. [...] So I talked to a doctor about it and she prescribed Ritalin. It worked. It really impressed me. I wasn't taking a lot of it, but it puzzled me so much that I could be depressed and just by taking this damn little thing about the size of a pinhead, I would feel much better. I used to think that I was responding to Attica or to the mining of the harbor of Haiphong. But I wasn't. I was obviously responding to internal chemistry. All I had to do was take one of those little pills. I've stopped, but I was so interested that my mood could be changed by a pill." (Standish 86-87).

In almost every text, however, cancer is the most common illness and cause of death: Mary in *Galapagos* has a brain tumor while her husband had already succumbed to cancer; in *Cat's Cradle* Papa Monzano dies of cancer; an anonymous old man in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* receives morphine from a grant by the Rosewater Foundation; Rudy Waltz's mother in *Deadeye Dick* caught cancer from a radioactive mantelpiece; the death of Frankenstein's mother in "Fortitude" is the reason for him to start to fight death, etc. This might well be attributed to Vonnegut's biographical background: his paternal grandmother, his father, his sister Alice, his brother Bernard, his nephew Terry, and his first wife Jane had cancer and/or also died of cancer (this family fate is an important point of reference e.g. in the autobiographical introduction to *Slapstick* while it even turns into one of *Time Quake's* central themes).<sup>8</sup>

Kurt Vonnegut is using medical terms rather loosely since he's not trying to diagnose diseases or to present us with an accurate account of the latest medical developments. It's the symbolic value these diseases possess in society and of course their functioning as metaphors for society's crises, providing thus insight into the human condition.<sup>9</sup>

When "Fortitude, a parody of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, was published in 1968, the world had already witnessed enormous developments in medicine during the previous decades. Molecular medicine, genetic engineering, cloning, transplantation medicine, and the first successfully performed human-to-human heart transplantations by Dr. Christiaan Barnard are all radical new medical methods and paradigms, yet they also changed the medical-ethical discourses far

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<sup>8</sup> It is little wonder that a cure for cancer is alluded to in at least two of Vonnegut's novels: In *Mother Night* the exiled veterinary Szombathy claims to have found a cure for cancer but is laughed at by the American doctors; he later commits suicide (cf. 113). In *Breakfast of Champions* the cure for cancer is part of a Kilgore Trout story (cf. 58). In both cases the cure for cancer remains withheld from the world because either the scientist is not taken seriously or the cure is only part of a hack sci-fi writer's fictitious world.

<sup>9</sup> While Broer ascribes to Vonnegut the use of the exact vocabulary, imagery, and phraseology of schizophrenia to portray the sufferings of his characters, Marvin regards the terminology as not very specific as Vonnegut in *Mother Night* "is not trying to diagnose Campbell but rather to use the general idea of a 'splitting of the mind' to explain how someone could be a Nazi and still think of himself as a good person. Vonnegut stretches the definition of schizophrenia even further [...]" (67). Vonnegut himself endorsed in an interview with Robert Scholes in 1973 the importance of scientific knowledge for writers and artists: "[a]ll writers are going to learn more about science, because it's such an interesting part of their environment. It worries me about some of our students in the workshop, as they know nothing about machinery, about the scientific method, and so forth, and to reflect our times accurately, to respond to them – to their times reasonably – they have to understand that part of their environment" (120).

beyond scientific circles.<sup>10</sup> Kurt Vonnegut's dramolett "Fortitude", though full of gallows humor and "ironic science", reflects some of these scientific breakthroughs and changes in medicine. However, the play's motivation comes from a desire to show the moral and practical consequences of these questionable medical advances and the resulting behavioural patterns of practitioners and patients.<sup>11</sup> In all its brevity "Fortitude" alludes to some sensitive medical-ethical topics like aging, depression, euthanasia, suicide, medical technology, cyborgs, patient experience, medical costs, or organ transplantation. I can only highlight some of the problems.<sup>12</sup>

Though the play's doctor-patient ratio seems to be ideal, the relation between Dr. Norbert Frankenstein<sup>13</sup> and his only patient, Mrs. Sylvia Lovejoy is best described as asymmetric and paternalistic, characterized by more or less "informed consent" on her side and claims to absoluteness on his part. Based on his scientific knowledge, his authoritarian position of power and his somewhat morbid, obsessive personal interests, Frankenstein suggests that he knows what's in Sylvia's best interest. He not only acts consequently against the traditional principles and ethics of medicine ("salus aegroti suprema lex" and "primum non nocere") but he also vehemently violates her will and exploits her autonomy as a patient (cf. Klugman 46). The total control and complete surveillance over Sylvia from a "fantastically complicated master control console" (43) exceeds the normal medical check-up on vital data. Disturbingly enough, her very emotions are under Frankenstein's control since he

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<sup>10</sup> Milestones in shaping the (bio-)medical-ethical discourse since the 1960s are especially the two conferences "Great Issues of Conscience in Modern Medicine" at Dartmouth College (1960), and "Man and his Future" at London's Ciba Foundation (1962) which began its proceedings. "The world was unprepared socially, politically and ethically for the advent of nuclear power. Now, biological research is in a ferment, creating and promising methods of interference with 'natural processes' which could destroy or could transform nearly every aspect of human life which we value. It is necessary for ... every intelligent individual of our one world to consider the present and imminent possibilities" (qtd. in Jonsen 15). While both conferences exhibit still a certain belief in technical and ethical progress, the writings of Kurt Vonnegut from this period already point towards a more critical direction.

<sup>11</sup> The technical details, the scientific value and plausibility of "Fortitude" are discussed in an anti-Cartesian manner by Jeff Karon, who compares the cyborg Sylvia Lovejoy with the computer EPICAC from Vonnegut's short story by the same name.

<sup>12</sup> Also I will concentrate here only on the printed script version; for an analysis of the translation of "Fortitude" to film and the resulting changes see: Boon and Pringle.

<sup>13</sup> While Mary Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein is a graduate from Ingolstadt university, Vonnegut's Dr. Norbert Frankenstein has his degree from Heidelberg; nevertheless, he is also standing in literature and films long tradition of the stereotypical „mad German scientist“. Beyond medicine, he and his assistant do also possess further degrees in engineering – an allusion to the ever-increasing technological complexity in the field of medicine. However, they perform their operations not hidden behind closed doors but proudly display their work to the public: Dr. Little cordially receives a full tour of the famous laboratory, and although Sylvia is described as an experimental creature she nevertheless is also regarded as quite a normal part of daily life who frequently makes the news of the yellow press.

feeds her with a diet consisting of alcohol and LSD to tune her moods and influence her dispositions.

Sylvia is merely a cyborg with more mechanical than human components who lives as a liminal creature isolated in the laboratory, a lonely head on a tripod. Since the mechanical and technical devices do not become an integral and controllable part of her body (like normal transplants or small extensions, e.g. a cardiac pacemaker, a cochlear implant, or an artificial limb), her body is completely dissolved into machinery which fills the entire first floor of the laboratory. This complete blurring of the boundaries between human and machine forces a reconsideration of what it means to be human. Sylvia's prosthetic machine is an invention by Frankenstein, designed to prevent violent actions against oneself. The final decisions over live and death are thus taken away from the individual and handed over to technology and to technology's supervisors. The constant flow of drugs and the technological devices do not only limit Sylvia's mobility and her ability to act, but her free will and her decisions are thus severely hampered. For Dr. Frankenstein, however, survival at any cost is cause enough to live, and therefore every form of life-saving technology is justified, even if this means simply to keep his patient going.

Since the 1960s, however, the doctor-patient relations have remarkably changed towards informed and more self-conscious patients, to shared decision making and evidence-based patient choice, a transition already depicted in the play: While Sylvia is still dependent, Gloria, her beautician and only friend, is already critical towards the medical authority and attempts to subvert it by disobeying orders and defying the inhumane technology. This leads to the play's basic ethical problem as almost all characters in the Vonnegut oeuvre are at one point confronted with questions of free will. In "Fortitude" this culminates in the issue of (complicated) patient decisions and assisted suicide, triggered by questions about the rather subjective notion of the quality of life

Gloria tries to give Sylvia the only form of freedom left to her – the power to commit suicide. Gloria develops the awareness and courage to follow her conscience and to act against the threatening machinery, but finally it's only *her* subjective moral imperative that commands her in assisting Sylvia in her suicide. On an intuitional basis motivated by compassion, love etc., her actions are understandable, but that doesn't make them necessarily ethical and her assistance justified. Can we leave moral judgements to notoriously unreliable instances like the „moral sentiments” or

intuition? Is Gloria respecting Sylvia's dignity in the Kantian sense that autonomy of the will is the basis of human dignity, that "the property of the will by which it is a law to itself (independently of every property of the objects of volition)"? (Kant 47). In her attempt to restore Sylvia's dignity, Gloria's moral maxims are not "included as universal law in the same volition" (ibid.) and she accepts to infringe upon Sylvia's will. She relies not only on her intuition but also claims to act in Sylvia's best interest, because Sylvia – when not manipulated – expresses a desire to end her life. But since it is hard to decide about Sylvia's state of consciousness (as she is surely in a very extreme position anyway, even without the drugs), Gloria can only assume Sylvia's *a priori* volition. Like Dr. Frankenstein, Gloria claims to act in Sylvia's best interest but doesn't necessarily respect it – her name finally becomes ironic as her actions cannot be regarded as "glorious".

The whole issue gets even somewhat complicated as Sylvia in a depressed mood also asked Dr. Little to bring her some cyanide, which he, presumably following his Hippocratic oath, didn't carry out. Assisted suicide becomes a central ethical issue as it questions the individual's general autonomy in society.

As medicine grew in scope and power the costs for medicine since the 1960s exploded, while simultaneously the governing authority in medicine passed from physicians to administrators and institutions, and medicine was merged into health care – which posed the questions of distribute justice and equal opportunity and the problem of rationing within the medical system. The play's medical technology is basically available only to the very wealthy. Frankenstein can maintain Sylvia's "death-in-life" existence as long as she is in the necessary funds:

Is this kind of allocation the best way to use limited health-care resources? While Sylvia's situation suggests the answer is in a first response "no" [...]. Often when new treatments are first developed, their extraordinary cost means they only benefit a few people. The potential result from such an investment, however, is a technology that could someday be commonplace and affordable, helping millions. (Klugman 47)<sup>14</sup>

Therefore: Is Sylvia's suffering in vain or might it one day benefit others? Furthermore, is Dr. Frankenstein really only an unscrupulous egotist who separates himself from human experience and thus sacrifices his conscience in a Faustian

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<sup>14</sup> The cost of the health care system plays also a part in the novel *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater* when the Rosewater foundation grants money to pay for medical care, culminating in a medical metaphor: "Poverty is a relatively mild disease for even a very flimsy American soul, but uselessness will kill strong and weak souls alike, and kill every time. We must find a cure" (265).

process? Similar to Mandarax and the countless number pills and drugs, also the invention of such an apparatus – no matter how useless it might appear – is deeply ingrained in the human nature and its unquenchable thirst for unlimited knowledge and the search for the technically feasible – even if it leads to such grotesque and perverse outcomes.

Among the natural sciences in Vonnegut's oeuvre, medicine occupies a position *sui generis*: "Die Medizin, die einzige unmittelbar altruistische Naturwissenschaft, kann entgegen ihrem Anspruch kein Heilmittel für die menschliche Verfasstheit und damit glaubwürdig sein" (Streier 160).<sup>15</sup> Vonnegut as a critic of society and of technical "progress" problematizes medicine and medical-ethical questions and sensitizes us for these problems. Yet, Vonnegut is not anti-science or a Luddite; he's deeply concerned with the ethical side of every scientific problem and tries to detect meaning even behind the most absurd outgrowths of the contemporary world:

While Vonnegut has a deep respect for science and philosophy [...] at no time he is willing to place the study of either science or philosophy above the practical concerns of everyday life. It is human life, its dignity, that Vonnegut wishes most to preserve. (Davis 10)

Medicine, like all forms of knowledge, *by nature* veils the ethical imperative presupposed by its very existence. Literature helps lift this veil as it frames the moral and ethical dilemmas and provides insights into the human condition and offers a historical perspective on medical practice. Literature interprets illness beyond all scientific, medical, and socio-psychological explanations, and interacts with the individual experience and the actual practice of medicine.

Vonnegut's "postmodern humanism" (Todd F. Davis) is not a fixed moral but a constant search for a criticism of reality. Medicine is therefore only reliable if it develops an ethical frame that promotes and ennobles humanity – or in the words inscribed on Kilgore Trout's gravestone "We are healthy only to the extent that our ideas are humane."

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<sup>15</sup> "Medicine, the only directly altruistic science, cannot – against its demands – be a remedy for the human condition and thus it cannot necessarily be trustworthy" (my translation).

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