

*Pluralism of Norms and Values:  
On the Claim and Reception of the Universal*

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By way of introduction I want first to distinguish between several types of pluralism; then I want to consider more closely the pluralism of norms and values in order to formulate, finally, the problem that is central to this essay, the problem of particular versus universal norms.

*1. A plurality of pluralisms*

The word ‘pluralism’ is of fairly recent origin. It was used here and there in the last century but has gained currency especially in the literature of our own time, acquiring a number of meanings. I want to notice three of the principal ones here.<sup>2</sup>

The word received a first sense in connection with philosophy. While not entirely unknown earlier, so-called philosophical pluralism came into vogue as a result of William James’ work *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909). With the help of the term ‘pluralism’ James challenged the prevailing philosophy of his age, namely, the idealist and neohegelian totalist conceptions of thinkers like Lotze and F. H. Bradley. Against their monism, which posited a single reality having room only for immanent

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<sup>1</sup> With thanks to Sander Griffioen for his contribution to the plan of this article and to Herbert Donald Morton for the translation from the Dutch.

<sup>2</sup> For the distinction made here between pluralism in philosophy, in social theory and in ethics, see especially the contributions by W. Kerber and L. Samson on “Pluralismus.” The distinction between philosophical, societal and normative pluralism is descriptive in character and far from exhaustive. There is also a pluralism of world views (see Wilhelm Dilthey’s ‘Streit der Weltanschauungen’) and of scientific theories (see Thomas Kuhn’s ‘paradigm switch’).

movements and mutually interacting components, he introduced philosophical pluralism. A philosophical approach is pluralist if it assumes that the reality we live in is marked by fundamental diversity and by the external character of the relations and interactions of individual things.

The word ‘pluralism’ acquired a second, more explicit meaning in political and social theory. Here it indicated the basic diversity of institutions and organizations in human society. As an expression of structural diversity in society the term was used especially by Harold Laski. I have in mind particularly his *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty* (1917). The societal pluralism he advanced in this work was a protest against totalitarian views of society (his followers used it to protest against totalitarian social movements). With his pluralism Laski aimed to break through the prevailing trend in social philosophy since Aristotle which regarded the state as properly encompassing all other social structures. Against the omnipotence of the state he asserted the independence of non-state organizations (churches, [159] labor unions, etc.) and defended their basic equality with the state community.

Political-social pluralism gained noteworthy acceptance in christian views of society. This is not surprising, as it facilitated stressing the unique position of the christian church, together with the significance of the christian family, the christian school, and so forth, without a need to appeal directly to supernatural theories from a scholastic past. On the catholic side one finds it namely in the authoritative Oswald von Nell-Breuning. For his ‘Pluralismus’ he sought connection with the idea of ‘subsidiarity’ prevailing in catholicism, laid down by pope Leo XIII in the encyclical *Rerum novarum* (1891) in order to oppose the various forms of state omnipotence then emerging.<sup>3</sup>

In dialogue with Laski, on the protestant christian side Bernard Zylstra in particular advocated a ‘qualitative christian pluralism’. Zylstra appealed to the neocalvinist doctrine of sphere sovereignty advanced by Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd. With Laski and von Nell-Breuning, he defended the sovereign rights of the various spheres or communities in society: He radicalized social pluralism to the extent that, in contrast to them, he did not relate the distinct status of social communities to a diversity of societal aims but rooted it in normative structural differences that are given with the nature of created reality.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Oswald von Nell-Breuning, s.v. ‘Pluralismus’, in *Wörterbuch der Politik*, Band V/2, 449ff.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Zylstra, *From Pluralism to Collectivism*, 206ff.

I come to a third, still more specific sense of the word ‘pluralism’. I mean the pluralism of *norms and values*. It is this pluralism that we shall want to analyze more closely in the continuation. It assumes a basic diversity of normative and then especially of moral systems. It was Nietzsche in particular who promoted this type of pluralism. In his *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* he reduced the plethora of moralities to two basic types, the *Herrenmoral* and the *Sklavenmoral*.<sup>5</sup> The air has never again been free of so-called ‘ethical pluralism’. Yet the term is really a *pars pro toto*, inasmuch as there are also other than purely ethical norms at stake.<sup>6</sup> In my contribution I shall therefore speak rather of ‘cultural’ or ‘normative pluralism’ or preferably *in extenso* of a ‘pluralism of norms and values’.<sup>7</sup> [160]

Normative pluralism is defended in various ways, in particular along the lines of anthropology and social history. A notable advocate of a psychological or anthropological approach is Arnold Gehlen. Gehlen held that the empirical sciences cannot avoid recognizing a plurality of moral systems. He undertook to account for their apparently irrational and contradictory multiplicity through anthropobiology, namely, through four instinctual, basic drives that would be proper to human nature. In the rise and institutionalization of a certain system of norms, one or another of these impulses would have gained the upper hand.<sup>8</sup>

The pluralism of norms and values is explained in a much more dynamic way in terms of social history. One finds this approach to pluralism in the historicism of Ernst Troeltsch, for example.<sup>9</sup> Overwhelmed by the tremendous diversity of cultural patterns manifest in history, Troeltsch rebelled not only against everything that smacked of a

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<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 260.

<sup>6</sup> The word ‘ethical’ often has a *specific meaning*. In that case it is placed on a level with other terms having a normative significance such as ‘aesthetic’, ‘juridical’, ‘religious’ and means about the same thing as ‘moral’. An ethical problem thus regarded is a typical problem of morality. The word can also have a *comprehensive* meaning, however, as in the ancient Greeks. ‘Ethical’ is in that case more or less identifiable with ‘normative’. That is so with the term ‘ethical pluralism’. What is usually meant by it is a pluralist view of moral *and other* norms. In this essay I shall also use the term in this way. Yet I prefer to speak of a ‘pluralism of norms and values’ (a) because I like to reserve the term ‘ethical’ for moral normativity and (b) because in this study I also want to deal with logical and technological normativity, and in common language these fall in any case outside the concept of ‘ethical’, even if it is understood comprehensively.

<sup>7</sup> Since Hermann Lotze and the rise of the neokantian philosophy of values, ‘values’ and ‘norms’ have often been used interchangeably. Yet the expression ‘norms and values’ indicates that the two terms are complementary. ‘Norm’ possesses a moment of foreignness and exteriority, and ‘value’ a moment of recognition and intimacy. Values from my perspective are those norms that people have integrated into their lives and thus have come to *value* as such. See the second part of this essay.

<sup>8</sup> Arnold Gehlen, *Moral und Hypermoral: Eine pluralistische Ethik*, 1969.

<sup>9</sup> Troeltsch deals with pluralism in: “Die Zufälligkeit der Geschichtswahrheiten,” p. 61. In the last version of *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* and in *Der Historismus und seine Überwindung* he speaks, more radically, of monadological or metaphysical individualism.

universalist, natural-law ordered ethics of duty, which would transcend history, but also, later in life, against a romantic-idealist ethics of goods, which envisioned history itself bringing forth at last the great good of universal humanity. According to Troeltsch the human ethos is particular by definition. It arises from 'new creative cultural syntheses' which people bring about in every new age from divergent social contexts and cultural traditions. Ethical syntheses are aimed at the future, to be sure, but if they are to be effectual, they have to be attuned to a given social structure and spiritual tradition.

## ***2. The pluralist pathos. The problem***

'Pluralism' is thus a word of many meanings. These meanings coincide however in their rejection of the monist coercion inherent in totalitarian ways of thinking. Pluralism opposes several forms of philosophical reductionism and emphasizes, not without reason, the heterogeneity of reality or the regional sovereignty of social structures or the incommensurability of norms and values, as the case may be.<sup>10</sup>

The pluralism of norms and values seems especially suited to present-day, post-modern people. For people today are not unaware of the unfathomable depths of human nature, the irrational course of human history, the uncertainty of life and the future; at the same time, they see all-encompassing theories of explanation arising on every side. People today are impressed by the worlds of science and informatica, particularly in the sphere of medical technology with its powerful but at the same time manipulative possibilities. They sense that they are threatened by ideological currents couched in fancy [161]jargon, by political movements hawking comprehensive tales, by religious fanatics with fundamentalist and integralist pretensions. In short, the modern person feels besieged by a multitude of individuals and institutions which, whatever their differences, all claim a monopoly on the one Truth and seem out to overpower the unsettled seeker.

The pluralism of norms and values is therefore more than just the latest theoretical perspective. It is deeply appealing to many people because it expresses a *pathos*, an

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<sup>10</sup> Pluralistic' labels not only a particular view of the world, of society, or of morality. People are also in the habit of attaching the name to the object under consideration. One then speaks of a pluralistic reality, a pluralistic church, a pluralistic ethos, and so forth. The word 'plural' or 'pluriform' would in such cases seem more appropriate. Yet what is one to do when James already spoke of a 'pluralistic universe'? In this essay I use 'pluralism' and 'pluralistic' in the primary sense of the terms, i.e., as characteristic of a particular view or theory.

appeal to stand up for human dignity, freedom of conscience and belief, private opinion, toleration towards those of a different mind, and responsibility based on openness and respect. Indeed, pluralism comes down to norms and values that are perhaps more at stake than ever in the transition to the new millennium. Thus it is not without reason that this study concentrates on ethical or normative pluralism. What is the status of norms in pluralist perspective?

The three senses of 'pluralism' are closely connected. In the first place, there is a connection between normative and structural pluralism. This is apparent once it is clear that social communities such as church, state, enterprise and family are not structures that differ primarily because of diverging *ends* — the old aristotelian-thomist misapprehension of 'entelechy', of goal-oriented organizations; they differ because of their *normative nature*.

My arguments at this point are to a certain extent in line with those of Herman Dooyeweerd and Bernard Zylstra and are threefold. (1) *The goals of an organization fluctuate and are thus not representative*. Think of the state as a civic law state, a welfare state, a bureaucratic power state. There can therefore also be a confluence of goals. Think of all the organizations that occupy themselves with the same goal of child care. These include not only families but also boarding schools, nurseries provided by businesses, state orphanages, etc. Whatever the goals certain communities may adopt, their motivations and approaches will differ depending on their proper nature and quality. (2) *It is not by their goals but by their structural nature that one recognizes a societal community*. The church is qualified as a community of faith, the state as a legal community, an enterprise as a production community, the family as a community of love, etc. Child care can indeed arise from love but also from corporate interest, legal considerations, etc., depending on the structural nature of the community concerned. (3) *The proper nature of a societal community is determined by a prevailing norm*. Each community can be seen as the embodiment of a variety of norms, but one norm prevails. Take the human family. It can be characterized from various perspectives as a social union, an economic household, a juridical entity a religious bond (cf. Ephesians 5:22ff.), etc. Yet its distinctive feature is that of a love community, where the other norms concerned become subservient and serviceable to the norm of love. The same holds *mutatis mutandis* for other societal communities. On reflection, they all embody a variety of norms, but one is

prevalent. In short, societal institutions cannot be sensibly distinguished as so-called goal-oriented organizations’. The nature of a societal community is recognizable not from whatever more or less arbitrary goals those involved in it may have set but from a prevailing and in a sense [162] supravolitional norm that conditions all their actions and relations and marks them, even with respect to their possible efforts on behalf of children, as members of a family, citizens of a state, believers, producers, and the like.

Normative pluralism is therefore closely connected with societal pluralism. Both in their turn presuppose philosophical pluralism. For societal structures and norms are of fundamental importance to our philosophical perspective on reality, and in their qualitative diversity cannot be reconciled with a monistic ontology.

Yet here we have an intriguing problem. In view of the fact that on different levels — political, economic, religious, aesthetic, moral and so forth — norms, as we experience them, are in the process of development, is there not each time a remarkable tension between universality and diversity? On each level we can see how *heterogeneous* our standards are, modelled by man and society. Yet *at the same time* we have, partly thanks to modern media, a feeling of community. We are not unmoved by what happens elsewhere on the planet. It is as if we can and must take what is strange to us or remote from us and place it within a universal horizon, a horizon that is *homogeneous*.

Religions and religious norms, for example, can be ever so diverse and contradictory, yet we still always refer to them as *religious*: everywhere in the world they demand that we stand in awe of the Sacred. Production norms, to take another example, are construed quite differently in traditional crafts and modern industrial enterprises, yet we recognize them in both cases as *economic* norms: in different ways, they express the universal requirement of profitability. A final example. Nowadays we strive to avoid imposing our western moral values on other societies, and yet we demand that no one in the world haggle about so-called human rights.

Thus the question arises: Assuming that ethical pluralism is right and that our norms do indeed necessarily differ from time to time and place to place, have we not at the same time to take into account this universal element that mysteriously imposes itself upon us? That is the way in which I want to formulate the problem of this essay: How does the universality of norms and values accord with their plurality and particularity?

I distinguish between the claim and the reception of the universal. In the first part of

this study we will look specifically at *the claim of the universal*. Thus after a brief historical and methodological reconnaissance of the terrain (3-4) there follows in this part a systematic reflection on the question of whether and if so to what extent, traces may be found, within the assumed particularity and plurality of human experience, of a universal appeal (5-7).

Next a subsidiary question presents itself, the question of how the universal penetrates and influences the particular and plural. In the second part of this study we therefore want to examine *the reception of the universal* in the realm of human experience. The analysis focuses on the one hand on the subjective appropriation of the universal (8-11) and on the other hand on the integration of the universal within the structures of human society (12-14). I close with the question of the sense in which we can and must continue to speak of 'pluralism' (15). [163]

### ***3. Subjectivism versus the theory of natural law***

In the previous sections we have noticed how in conceptions such as those of Troeltsch and Gehlen norms are conditioned by historical, social and psychological factors. Indeed, norms do not appear out of the blue. They arise within the cultural traditions of a tribe or nation. They are located within the social framework of a state or civic society. They are interwoven with the genesis, life history and lifestyle of individuals and groups. In short, the norms from which we invariably gain our bearings, consciously or unconsciously, as free and responsible people are *contextual in character* and thus in no small measure subjective and variable.

Or must we go still further? Does 'contextuality' mean that there has been a complete fusion of norms with the society in which they arose? Are they totally anchored in human subjectivity? Can we say, for example, in the vein of social darwinism, that in human evolution norms have no other function than to assure the survival of the group in the difficult struggle for life and that they are thus expressions of self-imposed group discipline? Or do they perhaps reflect, to speak in the spirit of marxism, the power claims and political privileges of elite groups in society and are they thus the ideological footings of the established social order? Or must we perhaps follow utilitarianism and posit that people and human societies are actually only out to attain what is pleasant and useful, so much so that whatever helps and does no harm is gradually stamped as

'morally good', even though this 'good' represents, upon closer inspection, only the subjective interests of a group?

Whatever one may think of such mutually irreconcilable theories, it is undeniable that the subjectivist explanation of norms is an old and honored activity in the history of philosophy. Not surprisingly so! Subjectivist interpretations of norms easily find points of connection in the contextuality noted above.

Yet from the outset there have also been serious objections to such radical subjectivism. I think for example of the profound critique levelled by Socrates and Plato against the subjectivist conception of norms embraced by sophists like Protagoras ("Man is the measure of all things"). It was not without reason that they feared a complete undermining of morals and of the Greek polis might result from such subjectivism. Plato accordingly held that philosophical reflection must lead to acceptance of universal 'ideas' such as truth, goodness and beauty, which would be binding for man as such, irrespective of one's historical context or social status.

Later too—I have in mind late classical, medieval christian and modern humanist conceptions of *natural law*—it was emphasized again and again that subjective preferences and group conventions may never be allowed the final word. On the contrary. By following the natural light of reason and attaining insight into the given order and ends of nature, man would be able to transcend the shaky basis of social conventions and preferences and ascertain once and for all what should be called right and proper 'by nature'.

The arguments customarily adduced in support of such an objectivist or natural-law oriented line of reasoning were speculative to a high degree. That was already the case with Plato. One need only think of his dualistic view of [164] man and world, and more particularly of his conception that the human soul in the 'herebefore' would have contemplated the eternal ideas of truth, beauty and goodness, etc., in their perfect purity; and that this knowledge, although afterwards forgotten or repressed by the sensory glitter and sensual passions associated with the soul's descent to earthly physical existence, can nevertheless still be retrieved through spiritual detachment and philosophical anamnesia.

There are also metaphysical speculations attached to the natural-law oriented line of reasoning. In retrospect these serve to underscore that the doctrine of natural law is not as universal as it first seemed but is instead socially conditioned. Thus in stoicist

ethics (elaborated in the Roman Stoa, Cicero), one was already compelled to distinguish two types of natural law. First there was an absolute natural law. It would have obtained in the golden age of the primeval era during which the freedom and equality of all people as citizens of the world was the absolute starting point. Subsequently, another time arose, decline set in, and a relative and restricted natural law appeared. The right that then came to prevail was meant to justify the ancient institutions of private property and slavery. In the christian version of this doctrine, the Fall into sin in paradise formed the transition to relative natural law.<sup>11</sup>

Something of the same sort is to be found in the newer theories of natural law that became interwoven with modern philosophy since Descartes. Its contextuality can be seen in the speculative construction, derived from the ‘nature’ of man, of a ‘social contract’, a ‘contract’ that was understood sometimes historically and sometimes fictively but that in any case always served to legitimate the sovereignty of Early Modern Europe’s incipient national states and their laws in the face of the supposedly autonomous subject. These theories of contract were in fact period pieces. The way in which the rights of the presumably autonomous individual vis-a-vis the sovereign were ordered (by Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, etc.) reflected not an eternal rule of law but rather the social order in which the writers concerned had to twist and turn.

Crucial for the doctrine of natural law is the question: In what general ‘nature’ is this law anchored? Is it the *cosmic* world order of the Stoics, permeated by divine providence and germs of morality, with which the New Age movement manifests some affinity today? Or is it the *teleological* order of being of aristotelianism, adjusted to the christian belief concerning the sovereign will of God the creator (the *lex naturalis* as */ex divina*), in short, is it nature as a creation order ‘moved in the direction of a particular end’ as in the medieval metaphysics of being with inherent creation ordinances (Thomas Aquinas), a nature to which papal encyclicals appeal even today?<sup>12</sup> Or with modern philosophy should we think of ‘nature’ as the *rational* nature of man and as the rational principles of ordering that the creator [165] would have bestowed upon human understanding — a source cartesian, kantian and neokantian thinkers have drawn upon for general epistemological aprioris, or for a categorical

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<sup>11</sup> See for example Ernst Troeltsch, *Aufsätze zur Geistesgeschichte and Religionssoziologie*, 156-90.

<sup>12</sup> See the fundamental observations of pope John Paul II in *Veritatis splendor* §§43-53 and §§71-75. Here lies the basis of the distinctive view of ‘natural’ birth control, and so forth.

moral imperative, or from which they have distilled a number of absolute metaphysical values, a source still popular even today among secular humanists?

#### ***4. Metaphysical intuition? The reflective-empirical method***

All these theories represent honorable efforts to prevent moral decline and social disintegration and to furnish norms and values with a realistic, objective basis. Lamentably, we cannot examine here the strong and weak sides of each of the separate theories. That the price they exacted is the above-noted contextuality of norms is, however, clear. How could it be otherwise given the tendency of the platonic and natural law theories to distance themselves from human and certainly from historical experience? In some fashion or another they must as a result be consigned to the category of *metaphysical thinking*.

Here we come to what I believe to be a parting of the ways. Namely, I start from the assumption that metaphysics is impossible. It is impossible because and to the extent that metaphysical thought endeavors, through unconfirmable philosophical intuition and/or speculative argumentation, to *transcend* the human experience of reality in the direction of a divine Cause, a soul substance, a moral natural order, a realm of universal-values, etc. In some way or another, metaphysics ignores the limitations of the human situation, seeks to go beyond the scope of human experiences, and offers conclusions that are neither provable nor refutable. One can only refute metaphysics by observing that it relinquishes the *condition humaine*, i.e., the creaturely position of man as an earthly mortal.

Granted that the Truth is not directly attainable on earth, that it can neither be inferred nor read with the help of metaphysical intuition from a cosmic logos, a divine order of being, or the rationality of human nature, is the question concerning the universal not settled in that case in favor of the subjectivist side? -

Matters as I see it are not that simple. It was not without a reason that I referred here to the entire two thousand year old tradition of metaphysical thought and in particular that of natural law. For it is just conceivable that the metaphysical tradition persists to the present day as stubbornly as it does because it is not merely pursuing an illusion that leads us away from experience but also represents a legitimate *Anliegen*, a deeper desire that brings us to the heart of experience. Well then, my thesis is that the notion of

universal norms continues to thrust itself upon us even when we oppose metaphysics in philosophical thought by *standing consistently on experience*.

This position assumes a broad conception of 'experience'. There is no reason to restrict the notion of what may be called human experience. Thus I shall not reduce it philosophically to sense perception or to experimental observation in the tradition of scientism, nor exhaust it in the acquiring of impressions ('sense data') in the tradition of empiricism. In human existence 'experience' is *multifunctional*. By experience or empirical knowledge I [166] understand the *many* ways in which man stands in the world *and* knows himself connected with it, thus not only by means of sense perception and logical reflection, but for example also through social engagement, economic appreciation, aesthetic valuation and, not to forget, in terms of political engagement, moral initiative and religious inspiration. These are different modes of *empirical* involvement in the world, different functions of experience, which equally deserve to be acknowledged as authentic. There is at least no reason to deny authenticity or originality to any of them beforehand. That would be a dogmatic prejudice! The consequence? Through all these *modi* of experience we are related to the world of phenomena, the empirical world 'does' something to us, yes, we experience it as *our* world.

If we are to proceed from the standpoint of experience, we shall have to account philosophically for this variegated palette of involvements in reality. The question then becomes: how is this variegated world of experiences related to the normative?

Norms function as *regulating touchstones* of experience, or at least of typical human modes of experience, as logical, juridical or moral judgment. We customarily stigmatize defective human actions as illogical, unjust, immoral, etc., and that is possible only if in our considered experience we can measure such actions by a standard or rule. Well then, the question arises: are our experiences, our empirical connections to reality, not so thoroughly structured from a subjective standpoint that the norms we hereby put at stake must be considered contextual to the core? Or is it possible after all that some strange, mysterious, obstinate moment of universality penetrates human experience, not such that we can fathom it perhaps, but such that it enables us to comprehend why people continue to seek something like 'universal norms' and in doing so succumb to the temptation of metaphysics?

The question of norms is one that concerns every person. Yet it is especially

pressing in scientific theory, particularly in the general scientific discipline called 'philosophy', at least if it is true that philosophy is marked by fundamental wonderment, that is, by the question or cry: How is it possible! In this regard the ways of the specialized scientist and the philosopher diverge, even though they both have an empirical approach because they are both involved in the same experiential world. The professional scientist in whatever field is confronted by the question: how does reality present itself to experience? The philosopher is confronted with the *antecedent* question: How, at bottom, is the experience of reality possible?

There we have my approach too to the question of norms. We should use a method that is empirical but at the same time philosophical. Should we be exclusively empirical and set about our work like specialized scientists in their various disciplines, then our problem would be quickly resolved, for the cultural anthropologist, the historian and the sociologist are only confronted with a factual diversity and variability of norms. Philosophically speaking we require a different method, a method that unites concentrated attention for empirical reality with philosophical wonderment at its mystery. I call this method the reflective-empirical method. By the reflective-empirical method I understand a method that does not take the experience of [167] reality as it presents itself *prima facie* but instead goes back in critical wonderment to explore under what general conditions this experience is possible. It is a method characterized by *transcendental openness* because it transcends the world of empirical phenomena and opens itself to something that does *not* actually appear in experience and can *not* be imagined or comprehended but that nevertheless thrusts itself upon us because it is presupposed as a preliminary condition of experience.

If we are prepared to pursue this way back, then the particular and contextual character of what people experience as concrete and binding norms remains indisputable and fully intact. But the philosopher is confronted with the thorny problem of whether our experience, which is tied to normative patterns that are particular, is not at the same time based in some way upon *normative conditions* that are universal. We could call the latter 'preliminary normative principles' or even 'transcendental aprioris', on condition that we not immediately make the undesirable shift into a kantian, suprahistorical epistemology or ethics. In the continuation we aim thus at a *general reflective or transcendental critique of experience*, aimed at ground laying aprioris. With this proviso: (a) that such apriori principles do not surpass experience

but just what is *given* in experience; (b) that they accordingly do not exist of themselves as a realm of values but are operational in concrete experiences; and (c) that no one can lay a (metaphysical) hand upon them.<sup>13</sup>

### ***5. Intimations of universality in art, language and morality***

My observations thus far may seem to be rather vaguely formulated. Yet I am convinced that there are some telling arguments to be made in support of the validity of ultimate, universal normative principles. I want to present a number of these arguments for consideration here, derived from quite varied phenomena: in this section, from the human capacity for empathy, from language and from conscience; and in the following section from skeptical philosophy, from science as an argumentative discourse and from science as a social organization. I am aware that the argumentation is cursory, perhaps at times too cursory, but the scope of this essay allows no other choice.

Let us look first at the *human capacity for empathy*. How remarkable is this phenomenon of empathy, the possibility of intuitive understanding of what is foreign to us, what Dilthey called "the interpretative method of the human science" (*die verstehende Methode der Geisteswissenschaft*). Man has demonstrated a capacity to enter into realms of experience that are foreign to him, including even alien cultures, and to understand their meaning, at least to a certain extent. Such understanding of meaning is really rather surprising inasmuch as it shows that man is not the prisoner of his own world. He is able to build a bridge between his own time and culture and the cultural expressions of people in other times and circumstances. Upon [168] closer inspection the experience of strangeness seems simultaneously to be an experience of familiarity. In the other, one also always experiences something of one's self, to the extent that it is recognizable and thus available for appropriation.

In other words, there is a certain affinity between cultures, even a certain commensurability between cultural expressions, however contrary this may seem to postmodern consciousness. Here are a few examples. Seventeenth-century ceramists in

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<sup>13</sup> The transcendental critique of theoretical thought as it was developed by Herman Dooyeweerd can be seen as a particularization of a general reflective critique of experience. This perspective implies that theoretical thought and everyday experience do *not* stand opposite each other as 'Gegenstand-relation' versus 'subject-object relation', as in Dooyeweerd. I hope to show elsewhere the structural affinity of these two.

Delft were thrilled upon being introduced to the refined porcelain and decorative arts of Ming-dynasty China. Satiated present-day westerners are still impressed by the monumental architecture of the Egyptian pharaohs of the Old Kingdom. Do such aesthetic experiences, which we probably all share on a smaller scale, not signalize that a normative principle prevailing in the past still contributes deeply to conditioning our present-day conceptions of art and beauty?

Upon closer examination, the *phenomenon of language* also betrays traces of universality. Not only the world as we know it but also earlier worlds and worlds that are foreign to us can in principle be named in one and the same language. Would we be in a position to speak in a single sense of the ‘art’ of the Chinese and of the Egyptians or of the ‘religion’ of primitive tribes, yes, could we for that matter speak at all of ‘person’, of ‘humanity’ and of ‘culture’ if such words did not ultimately bear a connection to something that we all recognize from within? In the lingual experience and also in the virtually unlimited possibilities of translation is there no presupposition of a universal normative moment that thrusts itself upon all of us in one way or another and that makes information and communication, yes, even profound fellowship possible?

That the metaphysical tradition endeavored and endeavors to misinterpret this universal moment as a hidden ‘essence’ behind empirical phenomena and thereby seeks to posit what is already presupposed, I regard as a derailment. It means objectifying what cannot be objectified and violating the mystery of reality. Without metaphysics, the wonderment grows.

And then there is the *voice of conscience!* Truly there is reason to pause and consider what is commonly called ‘the moral conscience’. At first glance the conscience seems to confirm only the particularity of norms. For in matters of morality the conscience places personal conviction at the center. And certainly it is objectionable to require people to act against the voice of their conscience. Yet in an individualistic age such as ours it is no superfluous luxury to remember that the individual conscience can never be the highest court of appeal. Countless studies have indicated that conscience is not a voice direct from heaven but rather the product of a *forming* of moral sensibility that begins in early childhood. On the ecclesiastical and especially Roman Catholic side there is, correctly, an emphasis on the ‘properly formed conscience’. In short, conscience points to a touchstone beyond

itself.

That aside, experience teaches that our conscience is an odd enough piece of work as it is. Our own times show that the emphasis on personal conscience does not lead single-mindedly to a privatization of morals, for example, but that it results equally in global engagement. Never has the [169] protest against cruelty, repression, and exploitation anywhere in the world rung out so loudly as in our age. The human conscience cannot react neutrally or indifferently to news of cannibalism in Irian Djaja, suttee, the ritual burning of widows in India, antisemitism and racism in Europe, even if it is true a thousand times over that such phenomena are deeply rooted in the indigenous values and customs of a society. And this moral sensibility is not a typically western phenomenon! It resonates *vice versa* in the complaints of Aborigines in Australia and in the protests of the Inuits and Indians of North and South America against western misconduct

The point I want to make is that the moral conscience is rightly disturbing. It is so because no matter how subjectively understood or modelled it may be, it is always more than the subjective conception of whomever. Especially in the 'negative critique' (Adorno), which is to say in the prophetic protest of conscience against the established order (or disorder), the voice of humanity resonates, a voice that smashes cultural barriers and appeals to principles of justice and righteousness that are truly universal. What other justification could one have for setting up 'universal human rights'?

Undoubtedly a 'conflict of interpretations' (P. Ricoeur) persists regarding the *substance* of preliminary normative principles. We do not have them in our grasp. The reverse is really the case. Hence a logical grasp too, I mean a logical understanding of principles, eludes us, in spite of all that metaphysics can offer. Principles are not an item *pro memoria* for our actions, but an ultimate guideline. But what precisely do they stand for? We have no more than a notion or idea of them. I mean, we do not dispose over an analytically comprehensive but only over an intuitive approximating concept, a *limiting concept*. And that allows scope. The one perspective is not by definition the other and does not have to be. Thus differences of political or moral or religious conviction lead regularly to hefty discussions. Such discussions are meaningful. They reveal our embarrassment, our human limitations. Yet at the same time they show that we do not give up and resign ourselves at this point. They show — I am still arguing in a reflective-empirical way — that people have something to say to each other that

surpasses their particular position.

### ***6. Traces of universality in philosophy and science***

*Philosophy* too is a phenomenon worthy of our attention in this regard. We have already taken notice of the deeper *Anliegen* of the various schools of metaphysics. In spite of this dormant transcendental openness, metaphysicians always play a dubious double role. They credit and discredit the universal.

Interesting too is the status of the many anti-metaphysical movements that have conceived their task as refuting the universality of norms in a subjectivist spirit. I have in mind here insofar as modern times are concerned utilitarianism, pragmatism, neohistoricism, postmodernism, and the like. Is there not in their various lines of argumentation an element of contradiction? Are they not unwitting witnesses to the impossibility of fully relinquishing a universal touchstone? For on the one hand theories and arguments are [170] advanced in favor of the proposed relativity and subjectivity of every norm and truth. On the other hand, all these theories and arguments presuppose — if they are indeed meant to be taken seriously and not just swallowed as so much pleasant chatter or continued conversation — that they themselves contain ultimate truth or are at least on its track. These movements manifest a self-refutation comparable to the so-called self-refutation of skepticism.

We move on from the phenomenon of philosophy to the phenomenon of non-philosophical science, the special *empirical sciences!* These sciences have for a long time given us the impression that they provide great clarity, yes, that they are able to put us on a straight track to the universal. The teamwork of scientific experts seemed really to satisfy communally experienced criteria and thus to point beyond itself to a touchstone of general validity. It was thus these empirical sciences par excellence which, from the age of the ancient hobbyists in physics and geometry to the days of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century positivists and neopositivists, nursed universal pretensions. As if they could throw the truth into our laps at the drop of a hat!

Meanwhile the signboards have been shifted. Given the present multiplicity of disciplines and angles of approach into which science has articulated itself (think of the many interdisciplinary projects), given also the temporal succession of scientific paradigms and heuristic models (think of the computer model in psychology), given

too the often decisive character of renowned names, prestigious institutes, authoritative journals (think of periodicals like *Nature and Science*) and the growing intrusion into scientific projects of political preferences, societal concerns and commercial interests, (think of the phenomenon of ‘sponsoring’), it should not seem surprising that historicity and contextuality have become permanent fixtures in the agenda of the theory of science. The belief in a steady, undisturbed construction and extension of the diverse empirical sciences in the direction of a single truth discoverable by a ‘unified science’ receives little if any support today.

Just so does the phenomenon of science, too, saddle us with the rather odd interweavement of universality and contextuality. For even if the idea of a single truth discoverable through science no longer seems credible and even if what passes nowadays for scientific knowledge is an abstract result of methodical reductions, refined specializations, heuristic models, societal impulses, etc., it remains the case that every scientific argumentation worthy of the name surpasses the social context within which it arose. A scientific theory should *qua talis* be universalizable. It has to justify itself before a forum of experts, and that forum is in principle as wide as the world.

Thus in terms of its intentions scientific theory is a universal affair after all. All who are engaged in science form together an international ‘communication society’. This may not always be literally true in a concrete empirical sense (how many scholars have not been locked away in quarantine through the years by one potentate or another), but it is true in a reflective empirical sense, that is, in transcendental orientation to a general obligatory standard. Scientific theory represents, as Karl Otto-Apel has shown in his transcendental pragmatics with a pick of arguments, an argumentative discourse that [171] can only have *meaning* to the extent that it presupposes a criterion of truth which scientists simply cannot ignore, lest they fall out of the argumentative discourse.<sup>14</sup>

In our search for traces of universality we can also look at the phenomenon of science from an entirely different angle than that of logical argumentative discourse, though in the latter lies the distinctive qualification of its proper nature. Science is also an *institutional organization*. It has institutionalized itself in universities and academic

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<sup>14</sup> From my plan of a ‘general reflective critique of *experience*’ it will be clear after all that I do not share Apel’s one-sided attachment to the specific mode of experience formed by logical-argumentative discourse as ‘transzendentes Sprachspiel’. Cf. Karl-Otto Apel, *Transformation der Philosophie*, Band 2, 256. His hesitation concerning whether to call the ideal communication community a norm or a goal also arouses concern. See R. van Woudenberg, “Einige Bemerkungen zur transzendentalpragmatischen Interpretation von Nonnativiteit,” 442-46.

hospitals, in research centers and schools, in corporate laboratories and specialized clinics, in libraries and archives, also in circuits of books and periodicals, of funds and subsidies, of congresses and seminars, of data banks and computer networks. In short, science viewed as an institutional organization is integrated in a web of concrete societal relations and as such manifests many non-logical aspects, aspects which likewise provide food for thought.

Here too, namely, the question of the universal arises. Does not science regarded as a social institution presuppose still other universal standards that it must satisfy in addition to a universal criterion of argumentation or truth? Undoubtedly. Science is dependent upon its institutionalization; well then, science would render itself impossible if within its dedicated institutes it could not proceed on the assumption of the integrity of those involved. I mean that the scientific scholar does not depend only on the claims to validity implicit in his arguments but also documents his work with insights of others who carry on their work in the same manner. This means that in fact he assumes apriori that in the centers and circuits of science elementary universal starting points of human experience are recognized and taken into consideration, such as freedom of expression, rectitude, loyalty, acuity, competence, and much more. The moment these are lacking, science itself is at risk.

### ***7. Regulative and constitutive. The privilege of the repressed***

Thus far my argument for openness to those puzzling, *regulating* moments in human experience that attest to universal normativity. We must of course not attach to this the conclusion that *all* human experience is oriented to norms. It does not make sense to relate perceptions of color and sensations of pain, experiences that people have in common with animals, to norms. I am concerned with those sectors of our experience of reality that may be called exclusively human, because they imply free judgment and thus orientation to norms. It is there that we come upon traces of universal normativity in the form of regulative principles.

It is striking that these regulative principles are at the same time always *constitutive principles*, or *criteria of meaning*. Upon closer examination they [172] turn out to be of importance as the foundation for a whole region of experience, the logical, social, religious experience, and so forth. They determine the meaning of a complete sector of

experience, whether people in this field take the obtaining rules into account or not. I mean this. A person may abandon a norm, but a norm will not release its grip on a person. If I make an error of thinking, then my train of thought is illogical, to be sure; but illogical is something other than not logical (what is emotional is not logical, for example). An illogical reaction remains logically qualified, yes, is even identifiable as 'illogical' because it is marked as such by the norm of (logical) truth. The normative principle determines the logical meaning of both logical and illogical acts of thought.

Take another example. Someone can be accused of asocial behavior, but asocial is something other than not social (something may be aesthetic rather than social, for example). Why? Because experience teaches that we apply the standard to someone's behavior in the very act of calling it 'asocial'. It is asocial when measured against the norm of solidarity with one's fellow human beings. The situation is in keeping with others involving economic and uneconomic actions, morality and immorality, religiosity and unbelief. Norms provide the measure *and* the meaning for a whole sector of culture, in its normative but also in its antinormative expressions. In this sense they have *constitutive or structural significance*.

It is encouraging that in many cases it is precisely through its being violated that a norm thrusts itself upon us all the more forcefully. Someone who commits an error of thought arouses in others the sense that thinking needs a criterion of thought. In situations in which hatred, lies and lawlessness flourish, we observe on the one hand a decline in consciousness of norms, especially among those who are involved, while on the other hand desire grows for truth and justice that can make claims upon all. If the *claim of the universal* can be felt anywhere, then it is in the camp of the deceived and the repressed. That is the beacon of history. Against marxists and liberation theologians I would add however that to be poor and repressed does not guarantee one a monopoly of truth and justice. Hatred and blindness can also be the portion of the repressed, distorting the truth. That is the tragedy of history.

### ***8. Positivizing***

I am aware that our search for universal norms can raise various questions. Is not an argument about principles that would be universal rather remote from life's concrete

practice, which is 'multiversal'? Even if it should turn out that the universal is something more than purely wishful thinking, is it then not just an item *pro memoria*, something to which seekers of certitude can consign their frustrations about the contextuality of concrete empirical norms but which lacks any noticeable effect on everyday life? Or ought we to take the opposite tack and argue that it is not the contextual but precisely the universal that is decisive? Is it not after all the case that everyday experience yields only rules of thumb for daily intercourse but that such rules have an impact as ethical norms only insofar as they can be universalized or [173] recognized as flowing from an unalterable commandment? In short, how can universal normative principles regulate the vicissitudes of life as it is individually experienced?

Thus we have arrived at the second part of this inquiry. Even if we are prepared to respect the *claim* of the universal in life's praxis, we have not yet answered the question concerning the *reception* of the universal in that praxis. And without a perspective on the way in which the universal enters into the experience of reality, that question, I am afraid, is left hanging. Well then, in the continuation of this essay, I want to examine in particular this problem of the subjective *appropriation* of the universal (8-11) and beyond that of its *integration* into human society (12-14). By proceeding in this way I should be able at the same time to show that the recognition of normative principles is of such a nature that, far from undermining 'ethical' pluralism, it actually reinforces it (15)!

What is the position of universal normative principles? Till now we have established that they are not direct contents of experience but *preliminaria* that only become operative in the act of experience. Normative principles are granted to everyone, as it were, but no one disposes over them. They have an *enigmatic* character. Who can say what love, justice and truth are at bottom? Each in its turn is a norm but as incomprehensible and *transcendental* as time — time of which the great church father Augustine once said: "What is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to someone that asketh, I know not."<sup>15</sup> So it is too with love, justice and truth. The universal norm is not given empirically but is empirically presupposed. As such one might say that it is included unthematically in the thought ('unthematisch wird mitgedacht'), as Karl Rahner put it. I would rather say that it is *implicitly experienced* by people. No one is entirely without it, but no mortal can objectify let

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<sup>15</sup> *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, XI, xiv, 17 (p. 224).

alone monopolize it.

Yet there is no society anywhere that has no substantive, objectifiable and formulizable rules. Apparently we are all able to appropriate the ultimate commandment, but then in human measure. This means that the universal in some way or another is particularized and concretized in temporal reality and that *it presents itself substantively in this way*. The universal functions but then as a legitimating and critical foundation of operative systems of law, morality and much more. Thus it is not unusual for jurists, for example, to distinguish between general principles of law obligatory for all and the obtaining or positive law that varies from country to country. The obtaining law is called a concretization or *positivization* of a ‘higher law’. The latter should be recognizable in the diversity of positivized forms of law.

Such an approach has many advantages. For the idea of positivizing establishes a connection between abstract principles of law and concrete legal practice. It renders the intuitive, ungraspable notion of law or justice useful as a model of structuring in civil societies. Against legal positivists it shows that one who can positivize justice can also bend it, so that positive law can also contain injustice, as for example where it perpetuates privileges, confirms prejudices, or ignores developments in society. It therefore makes [174] clear at the same time that positivized law is subject to criticism and in need of constant adjustment. It demonstrates in principle how and why justice is always ‘justice on the move’.<sup>16</sup>

The concept of positivizing can also be generalized and made fruitful elsewhere. In matters concerning styles of architecture, traditional folk dress and fashion, scientific paradigms, rules of social intercourse and moral standards, articles of canon or ecclesiastical law, we are in fact dealing with a process of positivizing. In every instance, rules are at stake, rules that are adapted, to be sure, to a given period and society but that nevertheless retain their normative force because and to the extent that they represent a concretization in time and society of general human points of departure. For this reason they also make transcultural recognition possible (including approval and rejection!). In short, we are dealing with variable, particular concretizations of generally obtaining norm conditions comparable to the positivizations of law, indispensable as a bridge between principle and practice,

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<sup>16</sup> Ernst Hirsch Ballin, “Recht in beweging.”

between universal validity and the individual experience of life.<sup>17</sup>

Speaking more abstractly, one can say that the universal stands by itself but is at the same time necessarily consigned to positivization in terms of *explication and application*. As a principle, the universal is no more than a beginning. It demands elaboration that is at the same time application. In the concrete rules of behavior and life, it comes within reach, yes, it proves its *value*.<sup>18</sup>

### 9. Prudence

It is of importance to approach the relation between universality and particularity not only from the notion of positivizing norms but also from that of concrete praxis, which is to say in terms of the distinctive character of our aesthetic, moral and religious experiences, and so on. I take again the example of justice.

The experience of justice, which is to say the subjective sense of justice, that is proper to every person (right on down to the little child’s protest: ‘that’s not fair’) unquestionably forms and measures itself in interaction with positivized norms, the positive laws, but only to a certain degree. Everyone is expected to know the law, to be sure, but almost no one except the legal [175] expert is familiar with the fine details of legislation and regulation. And to the extent that laws and rules are expected to be known, they in fact function only as a matrix for the subjective-juridical mode of experience, as a framework for lawful behavior. For the law cannot take into account personal circumstances that may be of the greatest weight where interests clash and obligations collide. The law is not a handbook for individual behavior. One who seeks to act justly in complex or difficult circumstances must consult *oneself* first of all.

Individual circumstances indeed can be taken into consideration in the wise,

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<sup>17</sup> Generalization of the concept of positivizing is also to be observed in Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven. Although there are some differences between Vollenhoven’s thinking and my own at this point, he too proceeds from “the positive laws that form a bridge” between the highest commandment and the concrete situation. See A. Tol and K. A. Bril, *Vollenhoven als wijsgeer*, 138 and 105; cf. 30.

<sup>18</sup> The process of positivization taken as an explication and application of normative principles needs to be sharply distinguished from a supposed *general* process of disclosure of norms, a sort of evolution and progression of the human spirit such as one finds in German romanticism and to some extent still also in Kuyper and Dooyeweerd. See J. Klapwijk, “Verschuiving van normen en historistische filosofie,” 36-40. Explication and application go hand in hand. In the idea of *progressive* disclosure, however, the notion of contextualization — the application of norms to specific situations — grows vague. Because the conditions of human life undergo unremitting change, the process of positivization requires resumption time and time again. Cf. S. Griffioen and J. Verhoogt in *Norm and Context*, 13; see also the conclusion of the present essay.

considered judgment of the judge. In any lawsuit worthy of the name, the judge orients himself not only to the general framework of the obtaining law but also to the particular circumstances, not to diminish law but to strengthen justice. If anywhere, then here juridical experience is required, that is, deeply sensitive juridical insight finely tuned to the norm of justice. That is the way jurisprudence develops. In the 'prudence' of the various courts the universal and the individual are brought together in the sense that one ruminates upon the deeper meaning of the operative law and of what accordingly may be called *in a more general sense of the word* right and fair in concrete everyday practice.

Well then, at the diverse levels of human experience we constantly encounter prudence. By 'prudence' I understand deliberation, i.e., the wisdom, sensitivity and resourcefulness of a normative consciousness that keeps its own counsel. I grant that moral action often falls into a humdrum routine or tends to conform to public opinion and media images. Yes, it seems at times to adapt to general rules of behavior or, worse, to *behavioral technique*. Yet is there not always something more involved?

Consider Aristotle. In his *Nichomachean Ethics* he posited a structural difference between technology and ethics, between technical knowledge and moral or ethical knowledge. Technical knowledge is skill or know-how that can be learned and passed on, a general and instrumental knowledge which, once appropriated, can be applied again and again without fail for practical purposes (e.g., crafting a pair of shoes). Moral knowledge he regards as of a different order; it is *prudence* (the aristotelian term is 'phronèsis'). It is not a general objective form of knowledge that one can gain from others; it is not a book of prescriptions that one can simply open and apply in changing circumstances. Aristotle characteristically calls normative prudence a form of 'knowing oneself, a kind of knowledge that affects oneself, a knowledge for which one must consult oneself in order to discover what ought to be done.'<sup>19</sup>

Aristotle's conception of normative sensitivity and 'knowing oneself is highly instructive. However, his contrasting of moral and technical knowledge is less satisfying, for we have already seen, (behavioral) technique is implicit in *moral action itself*. Yes, we must say that at every typically human level of experience, whether of culture, commerce, religion or politics, there are certain instrumental skills that can be learned and technical routines to [176] be encountered; one simply does not engage in

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Gadamer's subtle analysis of Aristotle's concept of 'phronèsis' in *Truth and Method*, 280-88.

uninterrupted self-consultation.

Normative action entails technical features. The reverse is also true. *Technè* has its own proper normative moment. A technical expert (and after all, we all possess *some* technical ability!) cannot just fall back on what he has been taught. To some extent he has to have his skill ‘in his fingers’. In other words, he too cannot get along without sensitivity to what is appropriate, thus without a normative principle, which I shall refer to here as the norm of ‘effectiveness’, that is, the right use and shaping of given materials (such as leather) as a means to realizing the intended end (a pair of shoes, for example). Exit Aristotle.

Thus normative knowledge really is characterized at *all* levels of human experience by prudence, which is to say by normative sensitivity. However routinely one may come to deal with rules, such sensitivity is simply indispensable. Especially at the forks in life’s road, when faced with deep dilemmas or conflicting responsibilities, one must consult oneself and one’s own conscience. At such times normative experience manifests itself in actuality as personal involvement and inner freedom. Then one transcends, even without any desire to be a rebel or critic, the positivized morality, the familiar rules, which may provide guidance to be sure, but not the solution. One ponders the deeper meaning of prevalent codes, which may be deemed good but which in one’s situation are not good enough. En route towards the future, one gropes for something that may be called normative *in the universal sense of the term*, something that may thus provide help along the way even in life’s new situations. One gropes for something of which one really already has some implicit experience or concomitant knowledge. By the way, is not this the literal meaning of the word ‘conscience’!

When ‘knowing oneself compels one to reject established codes, when it leads to criticism and rebellion — happily history has always known obstructionists — then those involved contribute, out of the freedom and resourcefulness that prudence gives, to the renewal of *mores*! An endless task! Rules fall short again and again, because the high call to holiness, righteousness, goodness and the like inevitably reach and point further than the rules we can cook up even in our best moments. Law and morality in transition? Prudence forms their driving power!

## ***10. Spirituality***

Philosophically speaking we have arrived at a boundary. We have found, on the one hand, that human experience is such that ultimate principles underlie it, in the constitutive and regulative sense of these terms (*constitutive*: insofar as they make human experience possible; *regulative*: insofar as they furnish its norms). On the other hand, we have found that people respond to these norms through the positivization of rules and prudent resourcefulness. What more could one desire?

I believe there is reason to examine the relation between principles and practice from still another angle. Positivizing and prudence shed light on how we cope with principles in practice, to be sure, but they do not yet do [177] justice to the *authority* and motivating *force* with which principles customarily assail the conscience. The reverence that principles inspire can assume awesome proportions.

Consider some examples from history. We recall with profound astonishment the poisoned chalice drunk by Socrates, for although he considered himself innocent, he had no desire to escape Athenian justice. Perhaps one might also mention here the incomparable death by crucifixion of Jesus, who freely sacrificed his life for humanity. Remember too those who during the last world war preferred to be executed rather than do violence to their conscience. Think finally of the many who in perfect anonymity have unselfishly devoted their lives to art, to culture, or to the care and nursing of those in need. According to their own testimony such men and women often could and can not do otherwise than follow the urging of their heart and respond to the voice of their conscience.

Thus the wonderment endures. We saw that Truth itself is not comprehensible, not objectifiable, not susceptible of thematic treatment in philosophy, not to be established with certainty in metaphysics. And yet we encounter them, people who appear to open themselves unconditionally to the depths of human experience, who indeed have heard a voice they are compelled to follow. These are people who experience their freedom not as a disposing over oneself but as a being at the disposal of the other, people who again take literally the 'response' in responsibility as a responding to an anterior claim.

Why do the lives of such people, in whose footsteps we are barely able if at all to follow, fill us with such profound respect and astonishment? I believe it is because we are able to sense what their struggle and dedication were all about, even if at a distance.

*Spiritual* sensitivity to the almost sacral mystery of human reality is completely alien to no one. More strongly, it is inherent in human experience. As Van Tongeren has said, “Without a sensitivity to transcendence morality is not possible, nor is any meaningful activity.”<sup>20</sup> I detect something of this already in the ancient Chinese thinkers Laotse and Chuangtse when in opposition to the extreme practicality of Confucius they emphasize that one can establish contact with the great, eternal Tao, the Tao “that cannot be named” and of which all practical virtue and wisdom (let us say: positivized Tao) is but a pale reflection.<sup>21</sup>

Transcendental openness is deepened here into spiritual receptivity. Such spiritual receptivity entails significant consequences for philosophical reflection! The transcendental aprioris we traced must be renamed. They must be termed ‘spiritual aprioris’, as indications of an incomprehensible but comprehensive spiritual *power*, a power that presses in upon people ineluctably, even in science, art and music, and sometimes conveys them to almost superhuman achievements. Spirituality as the basis of norms and values? Yes, indeed. [178]

These considerations bring us into the neighborhood of religion. For a great deal of spirituality is invested in religious experiences. Thus a philosophy that aspires to account through logical reflection for everything that is given and presupposed in human experience cannot avoid religion. Certainly it cannot avoid the core of all religious spirituality, namely, the belief in a divine power that touches people deep in their conscience and solicits their response. For however multiform and confused the world of religions may appear to us to be, there is one point in which it is surprisingly clear: believers know how to divest norms of their anonymity while continuing to respect the transcendent as transcendent. Norms are regarded as divine directions: the ancient Babylonian Code of Hammurabi (c. B.C. 1700) is already presented as a gift of the sun-god Shamash, the guardian of justice. Never without consequences! Where norms are regarded as divine commandments, they may lead to a prophetic critique of society but with equal likelihood to ideological confirmation of the established order.

What holds for religion in general appears in a quite special light in christian belief. Christianity too is marked by confusion about what the real purport of the divine message is. Yet the authenticity of the experience of faith is not an issue for christians

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<sup>20</sup> P. van Tongeren, “Morality, Transcendence, Conception of Life,” 50.

<sup>21</sup> Thus Laotse in the first chapter of his *Book of Tao*. See the introduction in Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*.

because they stand in the judaeo-christian tradition as in a living reality. In this way they know God as the transcendent creator of the world, giver of the Torah, the divine instruction for life. At the same time this transcendent God is the one who has made himself known as the guarantor of true humanity, by giving to his commandments a voice in Israel's prophets and a living figure in the 'ecce homo' of the Crucified One.

These considerations are not devoid of philosophical importance. For in how far and with what right can one still speak, from the standpoint of a spiritual experience of reality, of ultimate or final normative conditions? From the perspective of religious consciousness there is in any case every reason to speak of a 'penultimate mystery'. Yes, the moment we make allowance for the content of the christian experience of faith, principally the biblical revelation, we are compelled to divest these ultimate normative principles of their abstract legalistic rigidity and to learn to interpret them as divine commandments, that is, as expressions of God's personal involvement with man on his earthly pilgrimage.

### ***11. Man is ambivalent. Pluralism is ambiguous***

Self-sacrifice and disinterested love are exceptions to the rule. They depend on human commitment and are thus subject to human frustration. Suddenly we realize that a norm is not a coercive but a compelling power, not a natural law but a demand of appropriateness, a law that determines what should *properly* be done. A norm appeals to human freedom and activates responsibility. As such it can be observed but also transgressed. And indeed, norms are violated massively!

That brings us to a last characteristic of the *condition humaine*, and it is a negative one. Man is ambivalent in the face of the directives that engage him. It is not enough to say simply that people disengage because of their limited horizons, the frailty of their capacities or the finiteness of their existence. [179] There is a dark, covert depth in people whereby at a given moment *despite their knowing better* they break the high commandment. The whole of world literature from Aeschylus to Dostoevski attests to the ambivalence and inward conflict in man that entangle him in guilt and penitence. Perhaps nowhere is the complaint against human vacillation expressed with such bitter earnestness as in the pauline lament: "For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do" (Romans 7: 19).

One might pass over the problem of evil, for at bottom that is the issue, if it manifested itself only in transgressions of positivized commandments. The drama of evil however consists in its nestling *in the process of positivization itself* (not to mention its disturbing effects on prudence and spirituality). Positivization is not just an act of particularizing a universal principle, not just law and morality cut to fit, as we indicated in the first instance. For positivization is adulterated with manipulation and oppression. It is positivized law that lends the humiliations of castes, classes and apartheid a patina of legitimacy. It is positivized morality that represses women, exploits children, cages animals and plunders the earth. And it is positivized religion that sanctions an order (or *disorder*) so established.

The pluralism of values, till now the theoretical expression and inner acceptance of the variegated plumages of humankind, at this point abruptly loses its naive-idealistic or aesthetic-romantic allure and is recognized as *ambiguous*. The wonderment of philosophy can only turn into bewilderment where norms degenerate into underhanded terror. Abraham Kuyper once said that “uniformity [is] the curse of modern life.” Uniformity can indeed be a curse and pluriformity a blessing. Yes, pluriformity *is* a blessing if it gives expression to creaturely diversity. But is it a blessing if it arises from bad faith and arbitrariness and if in this way it fragments society? The pluralism of values has a reverse side, namely, the recognition and rejection of ideological and societal derailments; it means saying no to *fatwa* and *vendetta*.

We must not make matters too black and white. Human ambivalence means that the normative and anti-normative usually go neatly hand in hand. In systems of justice there is injustice, morality hosts compromise, and in the *regula fidei* lurk narrow-mindedness and unbelief. Conspicuously so? Often only in the vicinity of the victims!

Even less obvious are all the situations in which the positivization and realization of norms succeed outstandingly *but at the cost of other norms*. In such cases there is a failure to achieve what T. P. van der Kooy has called “the simultaneous realization of norms.”<sup>22</sup> One might say there is a shortage here of prudence and spirituality, of a considered judgment and a coherent vision.

I want to provide some examples of this from ancient and modern times. The pyramids at Giza and the temple complexes at Karnak and Luxor are grand witnesses to ancient Egyptian architecture, but they betray at the same time another Egypt,

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<sup>22</sup> Thus T. P. van der Kooy, *Op het grensgebied van economic en religie*, passim.

described in the Bible as a house of bondage, an iron furnace, and a culture of death. The spell-binding beauty of St. Peter's in Rome is an apotheosis of renaissance art and culture but it is at the same time the financial outcome of Johann Tetzel's ominous preaching of purgatory and [180] indulgences. The imposing style of the patricians' houses along the canals of historic Amsterdam expresses the world-wide entrepreneurial spirit of the Dutch East India Company during Holland's golden age, but it is at the same time a product of the deeply sunken morality of a great colonial power. The proud *skyline* of Manhattan symbolizes a standard for the capitalist money and commodities markets but marks at the same time the nadir of societal misery in terms of pollution, traffic congestion, racial conflicts, housing problems, drug addiction and criminality. With our blinders on we see the one and not the other, let alone their mutual interconnections.

Philosophy must *not* simply take for granted whatever presents itself at first glance as the accepted standard. On the contrary, philosophy ought to deepen human experience in a reflective-critical way, enlarge our horizons, and lay bare the anti-normative aspects that appear as parasitic counterweights that throw experience's scales of value out of balance.

I have one more observation to make *ad rem*. Without the reflective-critical openness mentioned above, philosophers will always remain strangers with respect to the phenomenon of religion, in particular with respect to the meaning of the biblical revelation. And that is a pity, for philosophy too is not without its blinders. Yes, in the diversity of philosophical schools and currents it manifests, for its part, the ambivalence of experience, the frailty of human existence. In other words, philosophy too must be held up to the light! Well then, if *Existenzerhellung* occurs anywhere, then it is in the light that the biblical stories shed on the black pages of our existence. Light from the other side.

### ***12. Decisionism? Habituation in P. L. Berger and A. Troost***

We have constructed a bridge between normative principles and practice on the pillars of positivization, prudence and spirituality. That these are weak pillars will by now be clear. For the ethical attitude can turn abruptly at any moment into insensitivity to the unconditional commandment. That precisely was the problem addressed by Soren

Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard regarded the entire civil and religious morality of his time as evincing a formal and unfeeling negativism. It led him more than a century ago to 'anxiety-laden' self-examination, to an almost neurotic concern with the purity of his own conscience, to a scrupulous process of weighing all things meticulously, to an existential and actualist decisionism. Kierkegaard held that man as a spirit is a 'synthesis' of soul and body, a meeting place of the absolute and the relative, the cutting edge of eternity and time in the actuality of the present, and as such a spiritual synthesis that must constantly be realized anew in the moment of decision.<sup>23</sup>

The question we face is whether the realization of norms in terms of positivization and prudence in which everything can grow askew and go wrong does not necessarily cast us back upon ourselves and thus bring us into the vicinity of Kierkegaard. Does the above not amount to a kierkegaardian argument for ethical decisionism? Are we not meant to implement [181] the eternal normative principle in everyday praxis through series of momentary decisions, through a linking of ethical syntheses?

I must deny that this is so. Decisionism is counterfactual. It is blind to morality as a massive normative complex in human society. Responsible human action requires highly personal decisions, to be sure, but the room available for discretion is restricted. And happily so, for nothing is so abnormal and so paralyzing as to be constantly wrestling with ethical questions. Naturally, everyday life can suddenly be turned upside down, as in times of war. Then people are cast back upon their naked individuality and existence seems to turn into a string of moral decisions. But in an orderly society morality ought to be something self-evident and ethical reflection a marginal phenomenon, to speak with Dietrich Bonhoeffer.<sup>24</sup>

Moral decisions are always made at a given moment, yet they evince a tendency to become enduring attitudes. They seek, as it were, a *pied à terre*. The immediate knock of personal conscience demands permanent resonance throughout the whole of life. Yes, the prudential shaping of norms desires to be incorporated not only into a personal lifestyle but also into culture and society.

With all the attendant difficulties! An artistic concept, for example, can only be realized in and through an art society to the extent that the latter is able to win a place for that concept in the midst of competing concepts in the marketplace of life.

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<sup>23</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, 79.

<sup>24</sup> See the introduction in Bonhoeffer's *Ethik*.

Likewise a religious concept can only be given concrete form in an ecclesiastical denomination when that organization has come to some agreement, whether sooner or later, with other powers, and so forth. In short, where positive norms acquire a societal reality, they clash with structures that are already in place and must therefore inevitably adapt to existing circumstances! And with this, the process of *pluralization*, which began with the process of *positivization*, continues. In the remaining sections I shall seek to elucidate these matters from a psychological, sociological and historical standpoint.

With respect to a psychological standpoint, I would call attention to the power of *habituation*. In the normal course of everyday life it is our experience that people are accountable, yes, that in all their doings from moment to moment they can be challenged. In this Kierkegaard is right. And yet most moments pass by unheeded. What Kant regarded as the ultimate ethical question, 'Was soli ich tun?' we seldom pose. Thanks to habituation. Consider traffic. The canned masses on the highway react to traffic lights almost instinctively. Through the power of habit, external regulations are interiorized. Little by little they become a psychological regularity, or as the Frankfurter Schule was in the habit of saying, a 'second nature'.<sup>25</sup>

This much is certain, that without the interiorization of values, which is to say without the incorporation of normative decisions into human conduct, life would be impossible. In their *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) Berger and Luckmann in particular show the extent to which processes in [182] society are conditioned by habitual behavior. They distinguish human societies from animal societies as open, focused on the future, and in that sense unfinished and vulnerable. Yes, because this society needs to be constructed (notice their title), it is unstable in principle. Nevertheless, societies are able to gain stability thanks to the symbolic ordering of language and thanks to the forms of habituation, patterns of behavior, structures of relations and institutions that arise again and again from such an order.<sup>26</sup>

By 'habituation' I understand the subjective transformation of norms into habits, which is to say into a personal or collective habitus. In fact, ethics through the ages has made allowance for this, in its doctrine of the moral virtues. For these virtues

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<sup>25</sup> See also my observations about 'habit formation' and 'causal explanation' in: J. Klapwijk, "Science and Social Responsibility in Neo-Marxist and Christian Perspective," 87-89.

<sup>26</sup> I let rest here the question of whether from Berger's standpoint human society is based *entirely* on societal construction or whether he too discerns a transcendental moment, but see the illuminating comments of Sander Griffioen "Geloven is afzien," 113-14.

involve the countersinking of norms in inwardly accepted attitudes or, in a word, the human ethos. This ethos may in general be distinguished by wisdom, justice, compassion, etc.<sup>27</sup>

Andree Troost has even developed a *theory of the ethos* and spoken instructively in it of the ‘deep strata’ of the structure of human action. In the first instance, he distinguishes between individual and-social dispositions, which is to say between the personal and collective characteristics of human beings. In the second instance, Troost points to the deeper, spiritual dimension of man, which he regards as likewise manifesting solidity and which one could perhaps call a kind of ‘spiritual predisposition’. He designates it the *religious ethos* of man. If I understand him correctly, Troost desires to reject actualism to the core. He seeks to show that even at the level where norms are experienced in critical connection to God’s will, human action is not confronted with *das Gebot der Stunde* but is precipitated as a fundamental *habitus*, our attitude *coram Deo*.<sup>28</sup>

In view of this spiritual dimension, I have to admit that words like ‘habitus’ and ‘ethos’ also have some disadvantages.<sup>29</sup> I prefer biblical terminology. The Bible is concerned not so much with an established custom or a cherished attitude as it is with a way of life, a pilgrimage. The Torah encourages one to walk ‘in the way of the righteous’ and to avoid the ‘way of the ungodly’. In the New Testament the very first Christians are referred to simply as men and women ‘of this way’.<sup>30</sup>

Whatever the metaphors employed, man’s inward intercourse with norms displays durability. Yet this durability cannot be called a ‘second nature’. I concede that in technical-scientific and political-bureaucratic circuits people are often treated as some kind of natural objects, even to the extreme that the citizen’s proper civic responsibility is totally lost (recall the destruction [183] of ‘civil society’ in central and eastern Europe). And yet, with or without Kierkegaard, one remains accountable for one’s deeds. A change in mentality or a cultural revolution cannot be excluded. *Habitus* remains the result of habituation and hence open to change.

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<sup>27</sup> In addition, ethics, and especially the ethics of idealism, knows an objective translation of norms, in the doctrine of cultural goods, which entails the embodiment of norms in social institutions (state, economy, religion); see the continuation.

<sup>28</sup> See A. Troost, “Wijsheid, intulie en geweten,” 142-50.

<sup>29</sup> The Greek term ‘ethos’ originally had the twofold sense of ‘habitation’ and ‘habit’. Etymologically those two English terms are affinitive, as too are the German equivalents *Wohnung* and *Gewohnheit* and, for instance, also the German terms *Sitz* (seat) and *Sitte* (custom, morals). Thus habits seek a habitation.

<sup>30</sup> See *Acts* 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22.

Habituation is to be regarded as the insertion of a positivized and thus particularized norm into an already established pattern of life. As such it necessarily involves a difficult adjustment, an individual or collective assimilation of what is experienced as duty, resulting in an on-going particularization of the universal.

One may take as an example of such a necessary habitual adjustment the so-called ‘calvinist work ethos’ that developed in the seventeenth century. This work ethos was originally oriented to the biblical norm of sanctification (e.g., to *Leviticus* 19) as this was elaborated by Calvin in his doctrine of the *tertius usus legis*, that is, God’s law as guide for life in society. Yet to Calvin’s mind the heart of the christian life lay elsewhere, in what he somewhere in his *Institutes* (III, ix) during a time of persecution still somewhat crudely describes as ‘despising the present life and [...] contemplating that to come’. With the blossoming of trade and industry in the countries of western Europe in the seventeenth century, the calvinist attitude underwent a sort of hermeneutical turn. Calvin’s persuasion was not abandoned; rather, it was related to the challenges of the new age, interpreted ever more strongly from the context of inner-worldly experience. It was fit into the dynamic pattern of life of the reformed and puritan middle classes, who came to regard their everyday work as a divine vocation, the fruits of their labors as divine blessing, and the prosperity thus acquired as a sign of divine election. Calvin’s sobriety and expectations of the future were bent in practice in the direction of frugality and inner-worldly asceticism, the ‘calvinist virtues’ that contributed in no small measure to the rise of what Max Weber called the ‘spirit of capitalism’.<sup>31</sup>

### ***13. Socialization of norms. Achterhuis and Bergson***

In *Deugt de ethiek?* the Dutch philosopher Hans Achterhuis has likewise strongly emphasized the need to countersink norms, but then in a societal foundation. Joining the French sociologist Latour he argues for a ‘material’ embedding of norms in society. He contends that public morality should be reinforced by placing tourniquets in the metro, conductors in trams, speed limitation devices in automobiles, by incorporating ecological costs in prices, and by pursuing public policies so attuned.<sup>32</sup>

Achterhuis’s argument is an interesting variation on the general thesis of sociology

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<sup>31</sup> Max Weber, “Die protestantische Ethik and der Geist des Kapitalismus,” particularly pp. 84-206.

<sup>32</sup> See Hans Achterhuis, ed., *Deugt de ethiek?*

that intentions and institutions, the goals of morality and the interests of society, are closely intertwined. Morality seeks to sanction the established order. The social order in turn does something similar as it endeavors to confirm the prevalent morality. It protects morality through preventive and repressive measures. One can speak here of a process of [184] *socialization* of norms, understood in terms of a mutual reinforcement which as such is indispensable to a stable and coherent society.

Yet this process, thus presented, can be misunderstood. For the intertwinement in question looks like a strictly particular societal affair. However, if morality was just subordinate to societal interests, then the universal starting point would be lost and there would be no possibility of *critical* assessment. Thus we shall have to deal in a different way with the relation between morality and society. But how? Does morality perhaps have both a societal and an extra-societal origin? Is morality perhaps twofold: here particular, there universal?

Here we arrive on the trail of Henri Bergson, who like Nietzsche was a forerunner of pluralist ethics. In 1932 Bergson gained a reputation with his study of *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*. There he states that human societies are at bottom closed, individual communities that produce a morality which is likewise private and closed, assigning each individual his place and duty within the constraints of the community, in order to prevent disintegration. Morality thus regarded is the connective tissue of society. In Bergson's view it is sanctioned in turn by a religion that is equally static and closed, the guardian of deities with restricted domains, the final guarantor of the solidity of society.

Over against the closed society Bergson posits the perspective of an open society, which is to say of a society marked by open relationships and an open morality, under charismatic leadership. This morality is of a different order from the first morality mentioned. It is universal. It supports and empowers no group interest but instead seeks to disclose the whole of humanity in love, so that the individual's personality may be deployed to its full potential at last. The morality of universal humanity exceeds to his mind the morality of group interests. It also goes back to religion, but then to one that is open and dynamic, based in the creative stream of life. This open religion ties universal human love to the love of the one divine, to which the whole of humanity is ultimately directed. It finds its highest expression in christian mysticism.

Of such an ethical pluralism, or rather dualism, in which the universal and the

particular are both respected but played out against each other, I am also no advocate. In Bergson's metaphor I would rather say that all norms arise from a universal source but that they also all flow into societal diversity. Even if humanity were ever to mature into a single open world society, it would still be premature and arrogant to think that in that case, as in Fukuyama's *end of history*, it would have overcome the temporal constraints of its standards of value.

More abstractly one can say that the universal is in its own right yet necessarily consigned to positivization, yes more than that, to social anchorage. Norms seek embodiment in communities. No matter how elevated their origin, they can only thrive where they are particularized to such an extent that they take critical and renewing advantage of the material possibilities that are given with a concrete society and with a concrete state of technology in order to gain social approbation. Take as an example the avant-garde style of music of Mauricio Kagel! The sounds he uses may at times seem [185] bizarre, but they are finely tuned to the technical developments (synthesizers) and social developments (film industry) that our age has adopted.

If norms are to endure then they must indeed be keyed to the structural conditions and practical possibilities of control that are present at the dynamic fringes of society. Politics can produce laws to its heart's content, but laws that are *not* enforceable (Achterhuis is quite right on this point) or the enforcement of which is not adequately built into the control mechanism of human society do not endure. Worse, they bring the universal norm into discredit.

#### ***14. Inculturation. Hegel and the sacred chain of tradition***

The translation of ultimate normative principles requires, finally, attunement to and integration into the historical tradition. It is a process that today is often called *inculturation*.

What sense does it make in a world like ours, in which all established values totter, to commit oneself to one tradition or another? Are we not on the lookout for new norms focused on today's possibilities and the challenges of tomorrow? Of what avail then are efforts to understand ourselves through history? Is *historical consciousness* capable of indicating the way to the future?

A warning is in order here. The term 'historical consciousness' is ambiguous

and can set us off on the wrong foot. Does it refer to the contributions that historical science has made to our knowledge of the past? Or does it refer to the awareness we have of our being involved in history? Theoretical reflection on and practical consciousness of history are by no means the same thing. Thus I propose to make a distinction within historical consciousness between 'historical thinking' and 'historical remembrance' (in Dutch between *historicaal denken* and *historisch gedenken*), that is, between a theoretical-scientific and a non-scientific manner of dealing with history. My thesis is that when creating norms we are dealing with the latter. We must cope *practically* with history.

This emphasis on remembrance as a practical activity is consistent with the line of my argument. Consider what has been said till now about habituation and socialization. I described 'habituation' not as a psychological research project but a psychic adaptation process, not as a theoretical reflection on but as a practical interiorization of normative principles, an appropriation and application in the direction of personal and collective characteristics (such as German 'Gründlichkeit' and French 'courtoisie'). Psychological reflection is secondary. 'Socialization' is cut from the same piece of cloth. I have not described this process as a sociological case but as an institutional assimilation of normative principles, thus as praxis in terms of social acceptance and integration. Sociological reflection is a side issue. Well then, with respect also to historical tradition, the matter is one of practical appropriation in terms of historical remembrance. Historical theorizing may follow later.

There is an enormous distinction between the *historicity* of remembering the past with the help of the symbols and rituals that remind us of our being-[186]in-history on the one side and the *historicality* of reconstructing the past with the help of the historical-critical method on the other side. Here I can only indicate the difference through the use of two examples.

As our first example I take the world-shaking events of our time: the decolonization of the third world and the disintegration of the second. Colonialism and communism both had a tendency to deprive subjected peoples of their folkways and national history, and the official historiography was subservient to that aim. Hence the end of this era meant not only the overthrow of powers but especially a 'revaluing of all values'. Lands and peoples were abruptly confronted with the need to rediscover and come to terms with their own identity and history. How difficult but also how inevitable

the problem is may be seen from the current revivals of tribalism, racism, ethnicism, ultranationalism, fundamentalism. An unassimilated past hounds those involved in it. It refuses to go away until, sometimes through a sea of blood and tears, it has been dealt with. That is what I mean by ‘remembrance’.

Let me take another example. Remembrance, the conscious processing of tradition, is perhaps nowhere so strongly cultivated as in the christian church. How could it be otherwise, where the church lives by the grace of incarnation and inscription: God became human in Jesus, God speaks in the biblical witness. The coming of Jesus the Messiah, yes, the biblical stories that span many centuries, make christians historically conscious. For their orientation in life they are singularly devoted to living intimately with history as it finds expression in the liturgy of remembering, proclaiming, celebrating, sharing. Here too remembrance is the interiorization (in German: *Erinnerung*) of the past into the present for the benefit of the future.

But enough. My point is that the intimate involvement with history that is manifest in historical remembrance is of an entirely different order from the attitude of detachment from history that is characteristic for historical research. Here, on the one hand, the ideal is to achieve critical distance, impartial analysis, intersubjective deliberation, objective description, suspension of value judgments, a testing of results by an international forum of experts, and value-free outcomes. There, on the other hand, we have the will to evoke the past in a spirit of gratitude or resistance, a readiness to imitate and carry on the community’s struggle, a quest for identity and meaning, and participation in the ideal values of an inherited tradition.

Hegel in his day joined Herder in calling the power of tradition a “sacred chain” that snakes through all that is fleeting and decayed.<sup>33</sup> And indeed, humanity really is tied to the past. The history that has been handed down projects a line of normative syntheses towards the future to the juncture where we, remembering, are involved.

Consider the early christian church. At first it was a Jesus movement, then a church in diaspora, and finally an established state church. Naturally people wanted to remain true to the message of the risen Lord, but to do so they had to deal with the history that was passed down and its interpretation, yes, with various tendencies through time. And what was the result? Established norms [187] gradually shifted with the course of history, not uncritically, but still! This process of cultural adaptation unfolded in the fields of faith

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<sup>33</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Einleitung in die Geschichte der Philosophie*, 13.

(adoption of the ecumenical creeds), of christian ethics (abandonment of early christian pacifism), and of canon law (recognition of the Roman pontificate).

Is tradition a *sacred* chain? Perhaps people could once say so in a world full of romanticism where one's own past gleamed as a source of goodness and happiness. We know better. We know that the past produced noble-mindedness but also injustice, not only *de facto* but also *de jure*, that is, even in its positivization of norms. I have in mind the cruel punishments (e.g., amputation of hands) that were enforced even for relatively light crimes. I mean to say that tradition, not only in fact (in its practical outcomes) but also in its normative aspect (the rules posited) remains deficient. It does not and cannot answer to what we, equally deficient as we are, understand to be the highest norm. Tradition therefore does not prescribe norms; it mediates them.

Would that still be the case if we found ourselves compelled to break radically with our own tradition? A radical break is as impossible as a reversion to the Neanderthal. For we have our moral identity, as Alasdair MacIntyre says, in our being members of the historical communities (family, neighborhood, city or tribe) from which we have come forth, whatever the extent to which we may overstep their particular boundaries at any given moment.<sup>34</sup> In other words, we may throw the rudder of our tradition over if need be, but even then it continues to determine our position. Never will we succeed in banning our cultural heritage from our *remembrance* altogether, no matter the attitude it inspires in us.

Here we suddenly perceive the importance of *historical thinking*, i.e., of the contribution of scientific historical research. Tradition is defective, the heritage controversial, the historical record unreliable. As a result, thinking is vulnerable. The moment tradition is cultivated, false sentimentality gains free rein. Myths generally thrive on the soil of national histories. Narrow-minded nationalism, a sense of special destiny or election, mystical notions of superiority, and fanatical racism rear their ugly heads in a twinkle. People get carried away with grand stories and power holders take advantage. The cultural heritage becomes everybody's grab bag.

The past needs to be digested in remembrance, but most carefully. To this end historical science is indispensable. The critical analyses of the historian form a demythologizing force, a remedy against historical falsification and repression or denial. Applied in the panoramic syntheses of historiography, thus as *applied science*,

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<sup>34</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 205-09.

such analyses benefit historical remembrance. For all that, cool thinking is no substitute for warm remembrance!

### ***15. Positivization and contextualization. From postmodern to reflective pluralism***

I summarize. The creation of norms sometimes seems to be the charismatic calling of an individual, an artist, a world reformer, a genius or mystic, of [188] someone in spiritual contact with an invisible world of universal humanity who is therefore averse to prevailing uses and customs. And there is indeed something to this. Our main thesis in any case was that the authentic creation of norms is always marked by such a universal *moment*, a notion of what is of benefit to humanity *urbi et orbi*. Therein lay also the infectious and renewing force of personalities like Francis of Assisi, Michelangelo and Florence Nightingale.

Yet we were compelled to add far-reaching nuances to this main thesis. Our first finding was that the *condition humaine* precluded universal standardization for earthly, finite mortals. The creation of norms is a concretization of norms, an explication annex application within praxis of a principle that is as universal as it is incomprehensible. It is the praxis that needs reordering again and again, a possible though imperfect translation of what people experience to be the highest spiritual guideline in a particular situation. Thus regarded, positivization was found to be a first step on the road to particularization. Prudential sensitivity and spiritual openness rendered this process of positivization still more individual and dynamic.

A second finding is closely connected with the first, as may be clear from the threefold conclusion reached in the preceding analyses. The commandment needs someplace to land, requires a *Sitz im Leben*. If the creation of norms is to have an enduring effect, it needs psychological interiorization, or translation into a particular habitus. It needs societal approbation, or attunement to a particular group structure. It needs, finally, historical integration, or critical assimilation within a contemporary cultural tendency. Habituation, socialization and inculturation are forms of contextualization. And contextualization means ongoing particularization.

I call attention to a third finding. The creation of norms is marked not only by the finiteness and limitations proper to man but also by his ambivalence, by ambition, repression and bad faith. Terms like 'translation', 'attunement' and 'critical

assimilation' indicate how difficult and painful the process of particularization and pluralization actually is. The high commandment seeks permanence in customs, structures and tendencies which are already the home of rival claims. The result is a bitter *struggle* for a spiritual heritage. It is a struggle traceable through the whole of life that even touches our spiritual openness, our open-mindedness for that ultimacy that should unite all people.<sup>35</sup> Anyway, the plurality of norms is also marked by suffering, a fight against evil, and the hope of a better world. Thus the process of pluralization is a process without end.

I mention a final finding. In the struggle for a better world, positivization and contextualization go hand in hand. Given the statute of finite man, the application of the high commandment to praxis is *at the same time* its forming in and from praxis. The creation of contemporary values, in a good or bad direction, is for this reason also always stamped by the psychological, social and cultural-historical context in which the process takes place. [189]

With that we have come full circle. We have returned to the vicinity of our point of departure, where figures such as Arnold Gehlen and Ernst Troeltsch, pioneers of present-day pluralism, advocated anthropological and social-historical approaches to the question of norms. Our search for universality compelled us to leave their ideas behind. In fact, in the last analysis the naturalism of the one (Gehlen) did not rhyme in the least with the anti-naturalism of the other (Troeltsch). Yet for all that, one can hope that our analysis has shed some light on the extent to which they can justifiably maintain that norms are influenced, be it by psychological or by societal or by historical factors .

Yet what does it mean to say this about norms? Is humanity *determined* by its characterological development, societal possibilities and cultural backgrounds? Let us respect the transcendental mystery of reality and say rather that humanity is *conditioned* by these things. Psychic structures, social frameworks and historical traditions form the indispensable bedding in which norms are particularized. So it is today, and so it has always been.

Nevertheless, there is a striking difference between then and now. In the closed communities of times past, people were little if at all conscious of the narrowness of

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<sup>35</sup> It is a struggle that produces not only accommodation or isolation but also the transformation of prevailing norms. Cf. J. Klapwijk, "Epilogue: The Idea of Transformational Philosophy."

their own insights. Poets, priests, judges and kings with some charisma were adored as gods. For they were the treasuries of the accepted norm! The norm was as fixed as the course of the seasons, even if it was regularly violated. People lived in a world of naive absoluteness. Axiological deviations were banned as barbarisms from one's field of vision and the pale of one's culture. *There was pluriformity but not pluralism.*

It is only in our times that the shutters have been thrown open to the dawning a day of ubiquitous pluralist awareness. There has been a general sobering. What absolutes remain for postmodern man? Every aureole has paled! Has this general disenchantment been a healthy thing? I believe that it has been. Recognition of the incommensurability of norms and values can lead and indeed has led to a reassessment of one's own position, a relativizing of one's own rightness, tolerance towards alternative lifestyles, respect for normativity from foreign soils, and the disclosure of new ethical dimensions. This new moral sensitivity seems to me to be nothing but gain.

Yet contemporary pluralism also casts shadows. In every field the discovered relationality of values has turned into a *relativism of values*. Norms are at stake. Morality is marginalized into a purely private affair. People hardly dare to stand up for their deepest convictions. Parents, guardians and teachers are in a quandary, no longer knowing how to transmit values. Institutions founded on a specific worldview, such as christian schools and christian political parties, in which tremendous normativity has been invested, are having the greatest difficulty holding on to their own identity. And the attachment of ethnic minorities to their own forms of culture often arouses ridicule and irritation rather than respect. In short, pluralism has created a climate of scepticism and cynicism, yes, of moral and cultural collapse.

We can also notice a development that runs counter to this tide of value relativism — a tendency towards value absolutism. Loss of the old world of spontaneous or 'naive absoluteness' can turn into a new, artificial struggle for something firm to hold on to — in various forms of dogmatism and [190] fundamentalism, or in 'apologetic absoluteness'.<sup>36</sup> Once on that track, people are disposed to assail one another with their

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<sup>36</sup> Ernst Troeltsch distinguished between naive, apologetic and evolutionistic absoluteness. From the original spontaneity of 'naive absoluteness' and its artificial (partly supernaturalistic, partly rationalistic) defense as 'apologetic absoluteness' (in the Middle Ages and in the Enlightenment, respectively) there came forth in Hegel the idea of 'evolutionistic absoluteness' — an ingenious but untenable attempt to reconcile the solid apologetic conception of absoluteness of that day with the dynamics of history by presenting it as the outcome and terminus of historical progression. See Troeltsch, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums*, 87ff. Cf. J. Klapwijk, *Tussen historisme en relativisme*, 222-29. At present the belief in progress and

own infallibility. Fronts are formed, what is ‘ours’ is protected and what is alien banned, sometimes even to the point of ‘ethnic cleansing’. Talk about cultural and moral collapse!

A reflective pluralist theory of the sort defended here will oppose relativistic and absolutistic extremes of pluralist consciousness by drawing attention not only to the fundamental differences that keep people divided but also to the transcendental enigma that unites people. Yet even reflective pluralism offers no panacea. For we saw how it encounters its own ambiguity. It compels us to look into ourselves. It makes us ask ourselves: What is the legitimacy of all these axiological options? What is their deepest source and motivation? Do they contribute to the restoration or to the corruption of humanity? How can we arrive at a fair judgment? Where do I stand personally in this spiritual struggle which underlies the public debate?

In short, a pluralism that is open to the human condition must impel us to self-criticism and critical interrogation of spiritual and societal currents. Given the dynamics of our time, resort to familiar normative stands is no longer possible for anyone: what does remain is precisely the need for ‘knowing oneself’, for greater prudence in societal intercourse, for spiritual openness to the All-encompassing. In a world in which our human traditions continually collide, pluralism can provide the occasion for a new understanding of reality and stimulate a new sensitivity to norms. If rightly and reflectively understood, pluralism can open minds and hearts for that *humanum* which is no one’s monopoly but which nonetheless encloses us all. [191]

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thus also the mix of it with the idea of absoluteness is no longer a subject of discussion.

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