

The xenophobic antagonism and “le sourire compassionant” Antagonism in a multi-cultural environment

“Islamic militancy is the gravest threat to Western security since the end of the Cold War”. Koran-quoting “terrorists” kill foreigners in Algeria and Egypt. “We have to preserve our own culture! “. “The Islam religion has bloody borders”. These are thoughts being expressed by top officials and by a growing population in the rich Western societies. Farther east, Muslims complain of the Indian Hindus’ destruction of the Ayodhya mosque in 1992. At the other side of the globe some Asian politicians give the Western civilisation --which is the product of the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment and begetter of modern capitalism and democracy-- an extreme hard time. In both Rwanda and the Balkans, fear whipped up by nationalist leaders served as the trigger for ethnic atrocities. Disagreement easily arises in a pluralistic multi-cultural environment. This does not necessarily has to lead to antagonistic tension or even violence. Unfortunately the (rational) Realpolitik is not always capable to contain this antagonistic “emotions”. It does not seem that (respect for) *human dignity* is prospering from this turbulence in a multi-cultural interconnected environment. Different cultures occasionally seem to clash with each other to preserve the “truth” or the power. The respect for human dignity is more often than not sacrificed to these goals of power and/or justified truth. Certain virtues and values are put in a rhetoric political discourse to “preserve stability”.

We like to analyse the meaning of human dignity in this antagonistic multi-cultural (or should I say multi-national) environment. We sincerely believe that human dignity is not rationally apriori grounded in an ahistorical and *absolute human nature*. Human dignity is likely perceived by a consensus of its cultural community to which its members are loyal. Hence why we will suggest that our *ability to empathy* could guide the present human race in a complementary manner to reduce human suffering. Empathy can indeed be considered as a complementary faculty to our rational ability. However it’s the compassionate attitude which stems from empathy that “morally” can motivate us to respect human fellows -human dignity- without trying to justify. Rational Moral obligation does not motivate or move people as easily as empathy does. Pure Moral or epistemological justification will be criticised as wishful thinking. A compassionate attitude -touched by *le visage de l’autre-* will likely result more often in human solidarity than pure rational-justifying thinking especially within an increasing interconnected multi-cultural environment.

We do not claim to provide a different paradigm for our rational thinking and its political ‘Realpolitik’ in these civilisations. We only suggest a complementary ‘tool’ which could help to ease blocked antagonistic socio-political situations. We aim to increase the *awareness* of being able to feel *empathy* which might be a useful and very powerful tool (in addition to our rational Realpolitik¹) to decrease antagonism between communities and individuals. A *reflective ‘mindfulness’* could function as a *guard against emotional derailments and ‘rational habits’*. This “mindful empathy” will likely facilitate the respect for the other in his/her human dignity, even in an increased multi-cultural environment.

No absolute ‘best’ system is at hand to guarantee human dignity. It seems however that our liberal democracy, though not rationally justifiable in universal terms and basically a western concept, is quite compatible as a political system to generate human solidarity. We do not exclude other possible political systems. As long as the political system is “open”², it will accept some form of *falsification* by its community members.

We acknowledge that not only the dichotomy between Fundamentalism/Objectivism and postmodern Relativism, but also eruptible emotions such as hatred and anger easily could cause increased tension and antagonism. Hence why *the ability of empathy (resulting in a compassionate attitude in best case) among these community members, guarded by a sharp mindfulness or bare attention³ will inspire “un sourire compassionant” and might enable to diminue anatagonism.*

I) Human Dignity and Empathy

¹ In his latest publication Fukuyama tries to prove that ‘social capital’ (high-trust societies) is essential to prosperity. We do not agree however with Fukuyama’s frenetic search for a single growth explanation, i.e. trust. There are many subtly different forms of capitalism, and each of these may be successfully grounded in different social institutions.

FUKUYAMA, Fr., *Trust. The social virtues and the creation of prosperity*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1995, 457p.

² POPPER, Karl, *The Open society*, London, Penguin, 1978

³ We admit that our analysis of attention - mindfulness is quite influenced by a Buddhistical perception and interpretation of facts. Still we believe that some paralels (despite its remaining differences) can be drawn between a western philosophy of science point of view (such as stated by M. POLYANI’s Tacit Knowledge) and a more Buddhistical approach.

(A) The dichotomy of Objectivism versus Relativism

What are the philosophical consequences of either magnifying the “otherness” into a monolithic enemy (a form of “Objectivism”) or insisting on the incompatibility and non-comparison of cultural differences (a form of cultural Relativism)? The extremes of such “(1) universal objectivity or (2) post-modern relativism” could be either a *totalitarian dogmatism* or a *nihilist form of scepticism*. Neither of them provide us a satisfying approach in our relationship with other individuals or cultures.

1) Objectivism often searches for a rigorous and often dogmatic grounding or justification. A so-called ‘judging’ Truth will separate the right from the wrong. Is there any final ontological answer to “What is our nature”? It seems that after 2500 years philosophers still have not found a rational grounding for such universals, nor how they could be proved⁴. Most searchers admit that encompassing or grasping all aspects of ‘our’ reality is beyond the ability of our ratio. We do not try to undermine the validity of the ratio, but only show the limitations of the human ratio⁵, especially in dealing with antagonism in an increasingly multi-cultural environment.

2) Relativism at the other hand accepts complete tolerance with respect to any form of living since we seem not to have any absolute legitimisation at hand. This attitude could easily result in kind of nihilism or a culture of fashionable ‘narcism’. Should we accept the idea of ‘fundamental’ differences, translated in a mild kind of relativism? We believe we should not fall either for the sirens of post-modern relativism since the relativist argument commits the error of “naturalistic fallacy”⁶, i.e. confounds “Sollen” with “Sein”. Cultural relativism makes normative statements based on factual, empirical premises.

Both statements, “*culture is the sole source of the validity of a moral right or rule*” and “*culture is irrelevant to the validity of moral rights and rules, which are universally valid*” seem to be unsatisfactory to us in dealing with an antagonistic multi-cultural and multi-religious environment, all with its different socio-political leanings .

Both (Ontological) “Objectivism” or its opposite subjectivist “Relativism” are rational endeavours to understand our world. But apparently unable to provide so called pure rational solutions in case of tension. Despite these philosophical endeavours, the question remains how to cope with increased tension caused by ideological differences? Though we value ethnicity and religion by itself they are often used as an ideological excuse to explain and “justify” discrepancies and conflicts which more often than not have their roots in a non harmonious socio-economic and political situation. The recent cleansing in the Balkans are such an example.

In a normal human relationship with “reality”, truth and certainty arise by themselves, not in absolute meaning, but based on certain characteristics within the reality itself. The reality is considered a (relative) discourse or context of human expression.

We are not inclined to ask ourselves: what are we?, because history has shown that this covers a quite kneadable definition. We are not so much interested to figure out whether the Helsinki Declaration is based on ‘real’ and legitimated human rights, applicable in an absolute manner. “What justifies a conception of justice is not being true to an order antecedent and given to us, but its congruence with our deeper understanding of ourselves and our aspirations, and our realisation that, given our history and the traditions embedded in our public life, it is the most reasonable doctrine for us”⁷.

(B) Mindfulness

“Experiments dealing with memory and group pressure on the individual show that what exists as ‘reality’ for the individual is, to a high degree, determined by what is socially accepted as reality..... therefore ‘Reality’, is not an absolute category. It differs with the group to which the individual belongs.” What we are saying here is: not that reality is not absolutely existing; but that ‘reality’ -that is to say what someone believes about reality- is not an absolute, because it differs with the group to which that individual belongs. It is the distinction between reality as it objectively is (but not justifiable by our present limited (rational) ability) and perceived or believed reality (and in that sense relative to the forms of life). The latter means that what can be known to be true is in part function of my spatio-temporal position and of my intellectual equipment. All knowledge presupposes a knowing subject. That does not necessarily imply that reality as such would be relative or that the truth or reality would not exist. Despite the fact that these reality itself is in a continuous process, we do not have the intellectual ability to ‘prove the Truth’.

⁴ ALEXANDER, Jeffrey, Fin de Siecle. Social Theory. Relativism, Reduction, and the Problem of Reason, London, Verso, 1995, p.105.

⁵ Some might describe this approach an ‘anthropological’ model, inspired by Hume.

⁶ MOORE, G.E., Principia Ethica, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ Press, (1903) 1982.

⁷ RAWLS, John, “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory,” Journal of Philosophy, 77, 1980, p 519.

The so called truth or *reality can only be shown*. A reality which cannot and does not need to be justified sub specie aeternitatis. What matters is to discover in a moment of 'wonder' **that** our life is deeply influenced by certain meanings which paradoxically are not 'rationally' justifiable or always in 'correspondence' with our scientific or theoretical thinking.

A '**reasonable**' attitude should be developed to deal with our modern antagonistic world. It does not mean that we claim for some pure pragmatic approach but rather count on our ability to *feel empathy* for other individuals (be it of our own or from foreign cultures), *guarded* against emotional outbursts by our *ability of mindfulness*. Strictly speaking we try to find a 'satisfying'⁸ attitude which faces a fragmented and sometimes antagonistic world. *Pure rational argumentation might be a necessary but apparently not a sufficient reason to communicate with other individuals, especially if they are from different cultures*. We suggest that other "mental abilities" besides the rational intelligence such as empathy (related to intuitive understanding⁹) could enhance the power of rational argumentation. The blending of *empathy and mindfulness* (which goes beyond pure logical-rational argumentation) might lead to a better understanding of each other. In that sense this enriched understanding could be a useful tool to cope with an increasing turbulent "reality". Is it not remarkable that many so called political solutions have been achieved after personal discussions among leaders whereby the 'understanding and (building of) trust' among them play an utmost important role? Not only rational argumentation (often based on a power game) but the ability of empathy for each other's situation, guided by an attitude of mindfulness could lead to improved understanding and communication¹⁰.

Besides many sensual impressions, there are those more significant and definite perceptions, rational thoughts, feelings, and volitions, which have a closer connection with our purposeful life. However a high proportion of them are not "perceived" accurately. If we examine more closely our average perceptions, thoughts or judgements, we shall have to admit that many of them are unreliable. They are the products of habit, led by prejudices of intellect or emotion, by our pet preferences or aversions, by faulty or superficial observations, by laziness or by selfishness.

Generally, we are more concerned with handling and using things than with trying to understand them. Thus we usually grasp in haste the very few signals conveyed to us by a perception interpreted by a certain (cultural dependent) point of view. Through deeply ingrained habit or tradition, those signals evoke a standard response by way of judgements such as good-bad, pleasant-unpleasant, useful-harmful, right-wrong. These judgements, by which we define the objects in relation to ourselves, lead to corresponding reactions by word or deed. Only rarely does attention dwell upon a common or familiar object for any longer time than is needed to receive the first few signals. So, for the most part, we perceive things in a fragmentary manner and then misconceive them. Further, only the very first phase of the object's life span, or a little more, comes into the focus of our attention. One may not even be consciously aware that the object is a process with an extension in time -a beginning and an end; that it has many aspects and relations beyond those casually perceived in a limited situation, that it has a kind of evanescent individuality of its own. The symbolization of these perceptions are mainly determined by our individual's self-interest and self-centeredness. The result are misconceptions because they are too narrowly defined or symbolized and distortedly perceived.

Ingrained habits resulting in too narrowly points of view should be falsified. This narrowness is the consequence of our rush into hasty or habitual reactions after receiving the first signals from our perceptions. If we muster the restraining forces of **mindfulness**¹¹ and pause for bare attention, the material and mental processes that from the object of our mind at the given moment will reveal themselves to us more fully and *more 'truly'*. Truly but not absolute since it remains a continuous process to be falsified. The spectrum of our understanding could be enlarged to a broader multi-cultural environment. *Perceiving* remains a continuous process.

⁸ SIMON, Herbert, *Reason in Human Affairs*, London, Basil Blackwell, 1984.

⁹ Intuition refers to its Latin origin *intueri*: to look upon, to see within, to consider or to contemplate. Intuition in that sense can be considered the art or faculty of knowing directly, without the use of rational process.

Silently, in the hidden depths of the subliminal mind, the work of collecting and organizing the subconscious material of experience and knowledge goes until it is ripe to emerge as an intuition. Slowing down and pausing for bare attention will uncover the depth dimension of the simple things of everyday life, and thus provide potential stimuli for the intuitive faculty. Sustained attention not only provokes the nourishing soil for the growth of intuition, it also makes possible the fuller utilization and even repetition of the intuitive moment. Increased consciousness by intensified attention will also strengthen and sharpen the mind's subliminal faculties of subconscious organization, memory and intuition.

¹⁰ We believe that a combination of empathy and reflective attention or mindfulness will likely lead to better results than a pure rational theory of (ideal) communication à la HABERMAS.

¹¹ Mindfulness, though seemingly of a passive nature, is in fact an activating force as well. It makes the mind alert, and alertness is indispensable for all purposeful activity.

(C) The Truth versus trust

We do not question the “existence” --or should we say “essence”-- of universally applicable values and truths, but we do question the pretension of “possessing” or certainly knowing these truths and as such imposing them upon the ignorant. Assume the “Truth” has been revealed through the Word of God, we still cannot justify to impose with force upon “non believers”. It remains an act of belief grounded in the Word but not ‘rationally’ ontologically justifiable.

To say we should drop the idea of absolute truth “out there” is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is no truth. Maybe we just try to converge to the/a truth instead of mistakenly justifying some causes.

Lao-Tse, the Chinese philosopher of the 8th century believed “that he who tries to justify himself is not convincing. One should abstain from (rational) knowledge to know the ‘truth’.” What is needed to live a human life is not so much a critical attitude as well as **a deep confidence**. This attitude definitely differs from our anxious desire for theoretical justification and rationalisation. In line with Lao-Tse we should give up the desire for total certainty. Trying “to live in truth” is related to attitudes such as *confidence, acceptance of vulnerability, absence of self-defeat*. Confidence in our own culture is a *conditio sine qua non* to survive within that environment. Questioning this discourse seems to be an inherently private matter. **Confidence or trust** in our own framework or ‘pre-assumptions’ *creates a truth* within this discourses. In that sense ‘universal’ but not absolute. “Universal objectivity”, in so far it retains a meaning, becomes *consensus*.

The ‘objectivity’ of meanings, relationships, esteem is only possible in the real participation of a concrete manner of life. An external and “independent” objective (i.e. rational) justification of any human act is a mere theoretical concept. “Whether or not the (Kantian) synthetic apriori propositions are true, does not even matter. We humans do not have the right to know them. We just can believe in them as necessary in a clear ‘perspective’ for our life”¹². Kant alleged that ‘sentiments’ have nothing in common with morality. He urged that ‘the sense for moral obligation’, independent of empathic feelings such as love, friendship etc, was the ultimate trans-cultural foundation of morality. Kant’s aim of a peaceful world could only be realised by our *neutral rational ability to respect the other*. This desire of pure virility binds human into a peaceful world community. We could agree with Kant’s reasoning but his neutral rational argumentation for respect does not seem to convince warring parties. Our antagonistic world has so far falsified his hypothesis. Moreover basic ‘instinctive’ emotions rather than rational argumentation have always played an important and often destructive role in the ‘encounters’ between individuals and cultures. Our ability of **mindful empathy** is likely better equipped to neutralize this eruptive and destructive emotions. We believe that empathy is a ‘sentiment’, an elevated form of emotion.

Kantian ‘respect for the other’ expressed in the Categorical Imperative --based on the common feature of humans, i.e. rationality-- is not exactly a neutral premise itself. It has been inspired by the Enlightenment, typically part of a European culture. Those who do not use ‘rational’ argumentation are considered ‘irrational’, and as consequence deprived of truth and moral knowledge. A society which claims to ban any form of irrationality, creates the highest form of irrationalism herself¹³. And irrationalism is easily interpreted as that what is different from our own perceptions.

“Respect for human dignity” is closely related to the so called human rights. Should we abide to the claim to know the (objective) nature of human being, assuming the premise to “have” a moral “intuition” of this human dignity? The discovery of the real essence of the human dignity would presuppose this so called Archimedean view¹⁴ which according to us goes beyond the ability of our rational knowledge. Intuitively speaking we might have some (intuitive) ‘idea’ though the expression of this idea would remain dependent of some linguistically and therefore limited framework. Hence why the road of absolute knowledge is not so safe as we think it is. Our violent history has shown this more than occasionally.

Our rational abilities do not fulfil the criteria of ultimacy, adequacy or optimality. The Truth does not lie within the range of our rational ability. Our search is not a final vocabulary which explicates the notions of “objective point of view” and “the correspondence of language of reality”, but an “efficient and ‘satisfying’ attitude” to handle the question of human dignity in a concrete historical context for example. In our discussion here we do not seek to convince any outsider about the Truth with an external justification based on apriori knowledge or even esoteric intuition. At present we settle for an internal point of view within the contingency and historicity of own languages.

¹² NIETZSCHE, Friedrich, *Jenseits von Gut und Bose*, Munchen, C. Hanser Verlag, (1885) 1966, p.20

¹³ VANDEVELDE, Antoon, doctoraal thesis:, p.568.

¹⁴ WILLIAMS, Bernard, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Glasgow, Fontana Press, 1985.

The “moral obligation” of acting against ‘violations’ of our human dignity is therefore not so much based upon the ‘dignity an sich’ but upon the articulation of our desires. “What is justified” is what is considered by the social consensus as an object of desire. Human rights are a guideline, an expression of our desires. The ‘justification’ is a desire within a certain contingent discourse which will require communication between different cultures. *If we cannot be purely ‘rational’, in the sense of an ultimate incontestable justification, we at least can try to be ‘reasonable’.* Reasonable here means to be integer, i.e. to be loyal to one’s conviction and values. It is the policy of acting in (non dogmatic) accordance with one’s values, of expressing, of upholding and translating them into practical reality. If we cannot exclusively rely upon a neutral and impartial ‘language’ to express our interhuman relationships, then **confidence** or **trust** (rather than rational moral obligation) takes an important social-normative, and integrating role.

(D) Empathy

The integrating factor in the process of understanding might be **trust**, its “binding” factor could be described as “**mindful empathy**”.

Communication presupposes the ability to share “common features”, which among others could be described as ‘empathy’ for other human fellows. This **ability of empathy** might be generated by the fact that human beings can be ‘touched by le visage de l’autre’. This empathy can be interpreted as the motivational force for “*com-passionate*” *action* which releases energy and ‘courage’. A biased emotional feeling of empathy however, out of fear for our own position, leads to an unhealthy attachment to the other or its medium. An unbiased feeling at the other hand will more likely generate a more healthy and genuine com-passion. Our **ability of reflective attention** or **mindfulness** could refrain us from “*passionate*” outbursts of often destructive *emotions*. This mindfulness is a kind of luminous conscience.

Instead of justifying ‘the culture of Human Rights’ --claiming to be True-- we believe to think that the acceptance of this rights is not so much an increased awareness of the (absolute rational) moral law, but rather a “*progress of emotions*”. The expansion of this culture has been drastically enhanced by the ability to consider similarities between humans rather than only differences. It are ‘elevated sentiments or feelings’ such as **empathy and affinity**, along instinctive emotions as hatred, anger and lust which drive our human activities. These more elevated feelings find a ‘discourse’, blossom up in a relatively ‘secure’ environment. Feeling of security and a sense of empathy goes hand in hand, as does peace and economic productivity and prosperity. The more fierce life is, the more we must be afraid and the more dangerous situation one is in, the less time and energy one can devote to think about the manner people’s lives with whom one does not identify oneself.

Mindfulness relies to the process of comprehension, of understanding. Of particular importance is the awareness or mindfulness of feelings (sensivity), by which one learns to distinguish between the feelings linked with a perception, and the subsequent emotional reaction to it. Mindfulness could refrain us from destructive emotional outbursts as result of these feelings/sensitivity. Therefore we call ‘**mindful empathy**’ the ability to ‘perceive feelings’, guarded against emotional reactions. ‘**Confident empathy**’ is the same ability to ‘feel’ within a relatively secure environment of trust and confidence.

It is this **confident empathy** --more than our so called neutral rational ability-- that functions as a fundamental moral guide. **Empathy or our awareness and ability to identify oneself with somebody else is our ‘fundamental moral faculty’.** *The human rights are part of a process of (self)consciousness which acknowledge the similarities between different humans*¹⁵. The ability of empathy considers similarities between humans rather than differences. “The idea that we all have an overriding obligation to diminish cruelty, to make humans beings equal in respect to their liability to suffering, seems to take for granted that there is something within human beings which deserves **respect** and protection quite independently of the language they speak¹⁶.”

This confidence (in ourselves and our cultural ‘form of life’) makes the idea plausible that a non-linguistic ability, the *ability of pain*, is what could guide us and the differences in vocabularies are much less important. Even the ability of pain itself might be historically influenced. As the “progress of emotions”,

¹⁵ It is obvious that our anxiousness to avoid pain and suffering is a historical phenomena which only appeared since Modern Times. Our ability of empathy might be a characteristic shared by most cultures, avoiding suffering might be a more recent and particular phenomena according to Charles TAYLOR and Toon VANDELDE. At the other hand we like to draw some attention to more *buddhistical* inspired societies where the *abolition of suffering* is almost the purpose of human life itself.

¹⁶ RORTY, Richard, Contingency, irony, and solidarity, Cambridg; New York, Cambridge Univ Press, 1989, p.88

(the awareness of) pain is varying over time and places. The ability of feeling pain (from others), mentally speaking, is related to our ability of empathy.

Empathy itself could either result in compassion or sympathetic joy. **Compassion** reconciles us to our own destiny by showing us the life of others, often much harder than ours. **Sympathetic joy** is sharing happiness of others as if it were ours. Sympathetic joy means a sublime nobility of heart and intellect which knows, understands and is ready to help. Compassion prevents sympathetic joy from turning into states of self-satisfied complacency within a jealously-guarded petty happiness. Sympathetic joy holds compassion back from becoming overwhelmed by the sight of world's suffering, from being absorbed by it to the exclusion of everything else. Sympathetic joy develops compassion into active sympathy. We here will emphasize the faculty of compassion, the ability of feeling and 'sharing' pain of others.

The "deplorable" situation of Bosnian Muslim women for example has been discovered by CNN pictures rather than by the Kantian unconditional moral obligation. In the traditional 'rational' context one *should* care for a foreigner because it is an obligation to somebody belonging to the race of human beings. Its tribe, customs or religion is here morally speaking irrelevant. So far the 'theory'. And independent whether this theory would be objectively true, we put forward that humans are rather touched by the real stories of (fellow) humans. One is likely more touched and moved by feelings and sentiments than by a pure rational inspired moral obligation. Stories with all its ingredients of suffering and hope likely move the average human more than a cold rational argumentation. Apparently "*le visage de l'autre*" in his suffering and hope for better will cause a feeling of affinity. This affinity translated in our ability of empathy might lead to a compassionate feeling. **Compassion** could be easily transformed in (a) real (feeling of) **solidarity**.

II) Human dignity and the principle of Solidarity

Solidarity to act against these violations of human rights and human dignity is likely not discovered through pure rational reflection. Again, we forego an ontological justification of what solidarity could or should be. For Kant, it is not because someone is a fellow Flemish or a fellow Greenpeace-fan that we should feel an obligation toward him or her, but because he or she is a rational being. Kant saw respect for "reason"/rational intelligence, the common core of humanity, as the only motive which was not merely empirical. Instead of emphasising our pity for pain and remorse for cruelty, Kant in his frenetic search for an absolute (and universal?) value found in the rational respect the lacking explanation, independent from a pure empirical world, for "morality"¹⁷. We doubt the strict distinction and contrast between rational intelligence and emotions to 'recognise' any form of moral obligation such as solidarity. We believe that any "moral obligation" is resided in *our attitude of empathy* rather than in an external imposed *obligation through our rational ability*.

Rational purity (a la Kant) itself is only possible if one can detach oneself from any form of sentimentality, which is quite unreasonable or maybe not desirable at all. The Kantian principle of universal peace might deserve the cause. Unfortunately the universal peace does not exist yet. Our ratio does not "recognise" such a sense of solidarity as something that exists antecedently to our recognition of it. Instead of a static rational entity, it reflects more a process in which the sense of solidarity itself is unfolding. The Christian and Kantian slogan "we have obligations to human beings as such" is a reminder to be attentive to human, but not as an ontological justification to be morally obliged. We have to start from where we are. Any so called sense of (a-historical) moral obligation, independent of love, friendship, confidence or social solidarity could dangerously lead to a antagonising multi-cultural world (instead of Kant's aim of a trans-cultural human). There is unfortunately no neutral judge at hand to separate the quarrelling civilisations. Our rationally inspired morality did not dissolve that danger either. Hence why a more modest but 'understandable' approach is followed: we are questioning the adequatio between the Human Dignity as such and the rational moral obligation. What matters as concern here is the way we can implement this human dignity by understanding the way it unfolds.

¹⁷ WILLIAMS, B, o.c., p.194-195. Williams distinguishes morality (the system related to a special kind of obligation called "moral") from ethics. "In truth, almost all worthwhile human life lies between extremes that morality puts before us. It morality starkly emphasises a series of contrasts: between force and reason, persuasion and rational conviction, dislike and disapproval, mere rejection and blame. The attitude that leads it to emphasise all these contrasts can be labelled its purity. The purity of morality, its insistence on abstracting the moral consciousness from other kinds of emotional reaction or social influence, conceals not only the means by which it deals with deviant members of its community, but also the virtues of those means. It is not surprising that it could conceal them, since the virtues can be seen only from outside the system, from a point of view that can assign value to it, whereas the morality system is closed in on itself and must consider it an indecent misunderstanding to apply to the system any values other than those of morality itself".

Hence why “solidarity creates herself by being sensitive for the particular details of suffering and disgrace of others, with whom we are not familiar¹⁸”.

It is our ability of feeling empathy and compassion which can “claim a certain moral obligation” (or should we call it benevolence) to feel a sense of solidarity with all other human beings. Despite the refutation of relativism and absolute objectivism, a sense of human solidarity remains intact. “Our insistence on contingency, and our consequent opposition to ideas like “essence”, “nature”, and “foundation”, makes it impossible for us to retain the notion that what counts as being a decent human being is relative to historical circumstance, a manner of transient consensus about what attitudes are normal and what practises are just or unjust. Solidarity should not be ‘objectively’ grounded, but is itself the basis from which ‘objectivity’ can be defined”¹⁹. It is because people are always living in a community that they are aware of (certain form of) objectivity, both in knowledge as well as in morality. This objectivity can be interpreted as a “form of life” or a certain living framework to which one is loyal.” A framework in which one has a trust. Yet at times like that of Auschwitz, when history is in upheaval and traditional institutions and patterns of behaviour are collapsing, we want something beyond history and institutions. What can there be except human solidarity, our recognition of one another’s common humanity?²⁰ It seems that our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as “one of us”, where “us” means something smaller than the human race. That is why “because she is a human being” is a weak and unconvincing explanation of a generous action. Nevertheless we believe that there is such a thing as moral progress²¹, and in that sense indeed a direction towards greater human solidarity. But that human solidarity is not thought or justified by an essence of a human being (unless intuitively understood), but is our ability to consider the traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race and customs) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation. *It is our compassion that senses the pain and humiliation of others and opens the window of solidarity*²². We are touched by “le visage de l’autre” who asks our attention and compassion. ***What matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right.***

III. Human dignity and liberal democracy

The question of “vindication’ of democratical rights can be solved by referring to the consensus of the community and its ability for empathy, rather than apriori principles. The acknowledgement of these rights is likely a matter of progressive conviction, of power lobbying by ‘communities of interest’²³. A well founded philosophical discourse will possibly not have the power to impose certain ideas. It could admittedly influence this socio-political discourse. At the other hand we should be aware that the consensus itself is more or less the product of an intellectual elite itself.

There is likely no *fundamentum in re* to externally justify any value as Democracy and its Declaration of Human Rights. We could praise parliamentary democracy and the welfare state as very good things, but only on the basis of invidious comparisons with suggested concrete alternatives, not on the basis of claims that these institutions are truer to human nature....A cultural pluralism, as being apt to the spirit of tolerance in democratic policies²⁴. Pragmatic because it tries to cope with a multi-cultural environment. In this pluralistic world one should not only tolerate each other, but also accept the reality that there exist different (moral) points of views. Daily we make judgements based on these points of views. Everybody has moral convictions or values, agreed upon by each culture. We indeed should learn to be open to each other point of view, i.e. framework, in this pluralistic world.

(A) Democracy

A democratical society might be quite well fit to have these tolerant discussions and respect for each others point of view. This is no justification (in absolute sense) of the (liberal-democratical) morality. It is

¹⁸ HOTTOIS, G and M.VAN DEN BOSSCHE & M. WEYEMBERGH, Richard Rorty. Ironie, Politiek en Postmodernisme, Antwerpen, Baarn, Hadewijch, 1994, p.114.

¹⁹ DE MAERTELAERE, Patricia, “Rorty’s ironisch conservatisme”, in OGER, E & F. BUEKENS (Red) Denken in alle staten. Hedendaagse Amerikaanse filosofen, Kapellen, Dnb, 1992, p.173-189.

²⁰ RORTY, Richard, Contingency, irony, and solidarity, Cambridge; New York, Cambridge Univ Press, 1989, p. 189.

²¹ Our so-called (ability of) awareness and mindfulness are critical success factors in the progress of our emotions, and in that sense morality.

²² RORTY, R., o.c., Cambridge, 1989, p.192

²³ OLSON, Mancur, The rise and decline of nations. Economic growth, stagflation, and social rigidities, New Haven; London, Yale Univ Press, 1982, 275p.

²⁴ RORTY, R, Essays on Heidegger and other, Cambridge, 1991, p.132.

the practical trial of “**falsification**” of these moral institutions in these discussions which will show whether democracy would be an apt system in a multi-racial society.

Criticism should be allowed to improve and evaluate according to the changing circumstances. What we suggest is the intellectual acceptance of a kind of society in which others get the chance to aspire to certain goals, even if they fundamentally differ from those we striving for ourselves. As long as nobody is harmed with this diversity, ethical or religious values cannot be the object of force or coercive measure²⁵.

Generally speaking it remains true that nearly all of the world's richest countries are free (meaning among other things, democratic) and nearly all of the poorest are not. This might us to conclude that there is a close correlation between political freedom, including (individual) human dignity and material prosperity. This correlation between wealth and democracy does not prove that democracy promotes growth as for example in the South-east Asian countries. Arguably, as people grow richer, democracy is one of the things they want, and it becomes even more difficult for governments to deny them. So it may be that growth promotes democracy, rather than the other way around²⁶.

We basically believe that ‘democracy’ is likely part of this “progress of emotions” and as such the “progress of morality”. The higher the stage of (economic?) development, the higher the demand for a certain kind of democracy²⁷. Again we foresee different forms of democracies whereby the ambiguity of ‘human rights’ and the ethnical and religious values could be incorporated in a unique and adapted manner.

We are not seeking to prove the truth of democracy. We believe in its pragmatic adaptability and its recognition of individualistic and social values. Democracy faces many forms os criticism:

- Some examples however show that the population still prefers stability and a certain level of welfare to “human rights and democratical principles”. Democracy apparently matters less to the Peruvians than Mr. Fujimori’s achievements to curb hyperinflation and bringing the savage Shining Path guerrillas to their knees. Order, discipline and progress count more for this ‘terrified poor people’ in the short term. That only proves that not all societies are ‘mature’ (yet) for democracy.
- Some economic experts, especially related to the World Bank, IMF and Wall Street, believe that democracy is not the key to economic growth, and political freedoms tends to erode over time if they are out of line with a country’s standard of living. These experts are convinced that the advanced Western countries would contribute more to the welfare of the poor nations by exporting their economic systems, notable property rights and free markets, rather than their political systems, which typically developed after reasonable standards of living had been attained. If economic freedom were to be established in a poor country, then growth would be encouraged, and the country would tend to become more democratic on its own. Still the question remains what kind of democracy.
- The governing elite in most East and south-east Asian countries don’t share the belief that democracy is superior and has universal validity. This isn’t surprising. Over the last 30 years, the region has left other parts of the world far behind with its rapid and unrelenting growth. And it has done so largely without democratical governments. Understandably, many of these miracle makers insist that political reform awaits economic maturity. Some go even further, contending that the Western political system, seen responsible for a host of social ills in the heartland, is unwanted in Asia at any stage, A few take the extreme step, accusing the West of pushing democratic encumbrances on them in an effort to sabotage Asia’s dynamism.
- South-East Asian nations tend to place their cultures high on the altar of state. Thailand has shielded itself, though somewhat unsuccessfully, from foreign influence with the “Thai way’ of doing things. Malaysia deploys Malay culture as a tool of political dominance. Singapore is trying to employ Confucianism and the Mandarin Chinese language to define itself. All this is understandable given the ravaging effects of colonialism in the region. Culture proved useful as a tool of nationalism and subsequently armed the state to deal with demands for democracy and human rights.

²⁵ HAYEK, F.A. De weg naar de moderne slavernij, Brussel, Acropolis, 1980, p.64

²⁶ FUKUYAMA, Francis, The End of History and the Last Man, London, Penguin, 1992, 418p.

²⁷ VERHEZEN, Peter, Streven, November 1994, “Indonesia. Een tijger strekt zich uit”. Economic development and growth resulted almost automatically in an intensified demand for mental and political “recognition” in a society. This recognition is mostly valued in a kind of democratical environment.

- At the court of Sultan Agung of the great Martaram dynasty, which held sway over Central Java (Indonesia) in the early seventeenth century, government office conferred prestige and status, allowing the king --who controlled all appointments-- to keep the aristocracy in check to an astonishingly effective degree. Suharto has evolved a strikingly similar system whereby, in the absence of a truly democratic exercise of power at the ballot box, much of his actual support rests on his powers of patronage.

We believe that the driving dynamic of an authoritarian regime is the need for political control. And changes which enhance individual liberties -an active press, unfettered intellectuals, and an independent legal system, etc- represent a threat to that control. The question is how (fast) an economic growth will give weight to more 'democratical' aspirations. That in the long run sustained economic growth has the potential to undermine the legitimacy of authoritarian governments and generate pressure for political pressure for political liberalisation is difficult to refute. The accompanying proposition that this must necessarily lead to a multiparty democratical political system is still very hypothetical. Neither dictatorship nor democracy can be apriori justified. The culture itself and its community (hopefully inspired by this sense of enlightened empathy and compassion) will guide us to the best solution. *The progress toward a possible democracy --assuming that this system would be the best fit in a multi-racial community-- will likely depend on the values and circumstances of each society rather than a manifestation of any universal or regional trend or justification.*

(B) Human Rights

Definitely the West does also differ in opinion with the Asian interpretation of human rights. Clashing civilisations over the meaning of "universal human rights"!? Basically we find two basic interpretations: the *individualistic oriented western culture* versus *the more collectivist (south)eastern communities*. These different views often cause heated discussions and disputes between the respective nations.

The Asian point that economic well-being is an important component of human rights is an eminently sensible one, as is the reminder that cultural differences need to be taken into account. The vulnerability of this so called Asian argument , however, lies in the supposed 'balance' between individual and community rights.

Although the Declaration of Human Rights has been signed by most countries in the world, one apparently argues among each other about their concrete application. The assumed universality of these rights are characterised by an *ambiguity*²⁸. Our human situation is characterised by a **mutual vulnerability** at one hand and a **mutual dependency** at the other. Hence why referring to this *mutual vulnerability* the liberal tradition tries to preserve the individual autonomy by safeguarding it against the possible unwanted intrusion by others. Individual sovereignty to determine and pursue their needs and aspirations is the expression of this basic principle. At the other hand one defines these individual rights within the context of a certain historical community. Our *mutual dependency* is entrusted by relationships and embedded in a community. The individual, even the most liberal, is always embedded in a network of principles of solidarity. Without the other(s) and the channels of communication -- the language-- a human cannot even express himself/herself. The Asian cultures seem to follow this interpretation.

The two pillars of modern human rights, the principle of liberal autonomy and the social democratical principle of solidarity, characterise this inherent ambiguity. Hence the different interpretations of these rights. The '*universality*' (as expressed in the Declaration) of these human rights should therefore not be understood as static discursive or prepositional categories but like a *communicative process* in which the ambiguity gets a place. In this process human rights can be interpreted as a *directive*, as a regulative framework, without an external essentialist political justification.

We pursue an internal deliberative point of view of what justice and democratical rights are. They are expressed in a social contingent consensus but also incorporate an ideal, a vision or hope. This vision has been inspired and motivated by our ability of empathy, which is assumed to be 'mindful and confident'.

IV. Human dignity and 'le sourire compassionant'

Nothing is less uncertain than the value of our democratical values. Democracy arose out of the renunciation of certainty (at the start of the 16th century) in the western world, or at least of the idea that one man could impose his certainty on another man. It took almost three centuries for that proposition to work its way through into the realm of politics. Kings and oligarchs had to cede their claim to decide what was best best for the people they governed. The Reformation released the great surge of

²⁸ KUNNEMAN, Harry, "De dubbele ambivalentie van de mensenrechten", in Westerse Cultuur: model voor de hele wereld?, Rotterdam, Kok Agora, 1994, p.73-91

individualism that created the modern West, including what we now call capitalism and democracy. For the first two centuries after the Reformation this new dynamo of individualism operated inside a still generally accepted body of Christian discipline. Then, in the 18th century, the era of the Enlightenment, this sort of discipline began to break down. People started to believe that the human mind alone was capable of answering any question. Humankind was self-sufficient. The age of scientific certainty had begun, including the Marxist claim to political certainty. This all has cracked down, and our community now searches a 'pillar of society'. Here religious groups of all kinds and certain ideologies are gaining ground in offering 'certainty'...or at least acknowledge a reality beyond our 'self-sufficient' ratio.

Trying to rationally justify fundamental 'certainties' shows a lack of loyalty and confidence in our forms of life. It is as if an existential uncertainty, deprived of a harmonious equilibrium between the different worlds of reality, clings to a theoretical and scientific 'sure' answer or a flight in "new born fundamentalism". But in vain. Reality in all its richness escapes the hubris of the ratio and the dogmatism of these ideologies. Confidence (in our democratical rules for example) undermines the idea of absolute certainty and security. We can not ascertain the democracy as such. We can only be loyal and confident to our (democratic) form of life, despite its incompleteness and imperfection.

A human being is not an 'animale rationale'; he is a being who perceives, senses, contemplates and acts. He is influenced by what is concrete and precise. To find an answer for the mystery of life and death, of the meaning of life and its conflicts, means to find a proper attitude in life itself towards the fatum of our being, It is not a theoretical solution or an external rational justification which will bring peace in ourselves and our community. The 'objectivity' of meanings, relationships, attitudes is only possible in the real participation of a concrete and historical manner of life.

There does not exist a criterion of reasonable/unreasonable behaviour independent of a certain 'form of life'. Something is significant important and worth to be aspired within a definite cultural context. Even when something is considered as universal 'reasonable' (such as human dignity and its human rights), i.e. when everybody (notwithstanding the cultural context) sincerely aspires human dignity, then still such human dignity and human rights can only appear within a 'context of meaning' (form of life). This requires a fundamental confidence with the way of living of the 'context of meaning'.

Philo-sophia (the search for knowledge and truth) is the itinerary of somebody on the way for existential knowledge and truth essentially related to self knowledge²⁹. It is not a self to be perceived as a self an sich, but one who is related to others. Together with these other fellows one is disposed to certain values which in a way transcend our rational ability but which nevertheless claim us to lead a "veritable life". Morally speaking one does not respect 'humanity' in a human being, but a concrete human being, not because he is the contingent incarnation of a certain 'value an sich' (which would be evident or justifiable) but a human being of flesh and blood who shows me as a value, withdrawn from my manipulation. A vulnerable being whose value urges upon me and asks to be respected....Le visage de l'autre qui demande ma compassion.

Maybe we might be "rescued" by the power of "**un sourire compassionant**" (a "compassionate smile"). The vulnerability of the other surprises us and causes compassionate reaction, at least an answering "compassionate smile". We try to understand the other, which concretely means that we empathically and compassionately 'contact' the other. Since *truth is not a monopoly of some particular thinking* we should temper our xenophobic judgements. Of course some fractions within communities will always be antagonistic. But unless in extreme situations, antagonistic violence does not bring peace and harmony. With an attitude of compassion however --not hatred and fear-- we believe that politicians could more easily diminish the chances of atrocities such as recently experienced in the Balkans and Rwanda. The ability of mindful empathy might enhance our capacity to find 'satisfying' solutions for (international) tensions and turbulence. Mindful consideration for each other without losing our loyalty towards our own culture could well guide disagreement when it arises, preventing it to erupt into antagonistic (international) turbulence.

Neither emotions, be it grief or joy, nor pure 'cold' argumentation guarantee a peaceful outcome in an increasingly antagonistic multi-cultural environment. Empathy guarded by reflective mindfulness and enlightened by a degree of wisdom will bear useful action. A possible result: le sourire compassionant as a complementary guide to our rational intelligence.

Peter Verhezen
Jakarta, October 1995

²⁹ DE DIJN, Herman, Kan Kennis troosten? Over de kloof tussen weten en leven, Kapellen, Uitg. Pelckmans, 1994, p. 37