

# **The Perception of the Human Self: A Proposal for Ethical Adjustment<sup>1</sup>**

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The late-modern or post-modern era is facing many challenges. Environmental issues, the fragmentation and moral disintegration of society and increasing levels of aggression have developed into serious problems worldwide. But also the phenomena of alienation and unbridled individual autonomy have been recognised as requiring our attention. In this paper we will set out to argue that at least some of these issues have a common ground for being rooted in today's perception of the Self. According to this perception, we think of ourselves as essentially 'self-reliant' and surrounded by a world that is sheer concrete reality. This has made it possible – though not necessary! – for man to adopt a detached stance towards his social and physical environment and, on the personal level, has led to a decreased meaningfulness of life. In the first part of this article we will try to pinpoint the way in which today's structuring blocks defining the human being have led man to believe that he is essentially self-reliant, and we will discuss the consequences of this belief.

If we are to counteract these socio-political and individual challenges, we will have to move away from such a detached perception i.e. we will have to adjust the very concept of man. In an attempt to make a positive contribution towards a new perception and definition of man's Self, the second part of this paper suggests a number of (ethical) building blocks that may help achieve this.

## **1. The modern perception of the Human Self**

The perception of the Self is modern in the philosophical sense, which means that it has been formed within the tradition of the Enlightenment and Sciences. Rather than offering us a unified idea of man, this perception is made up of a series of fragmented, at times mutually incompatible, subperceptions. The four most salient of these, each of which we consider of equal importance, are man as 'rational', as 'autonomous' and possessing an inner core, as 'hedonistic', and as 'self-interested'. In the following sections we will elaborate on the first perception of man, i.e. as a rational being, and on its unintended side-effects. This will be followed by a discussion of the effects of the other three subperceptions. It is the complex combination of these, and possibly other, perceptions that have engendered the challenges referred to above.

### **1.1. The Human Self as rational**

Since time and day, philosophers have debated on whether the human being is best typified by his ratio or by his free will, and whether the two views are mutually exclusive<sup>1</sup>. We will not go into these topics here. Relevant to this study is the change in perception of what is considered 'rational' and its unintended effects.

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As Taylor<sup>2</sup> describes, pre-modern man conceived of rationality as 'looking the right way', as recognising God's work in the world. In modern times, this perception gradually changed, with rationality coming to mean the pursuance of a 'causa sui' project. Its consequences for the progress of a great part of the world were immense. At the same time, it provoked a process of 'Entzauberung' (disenchantment – see below). The appropriate epistemology to really know and control the world—objectivity—led to a 'separation' between man and surrounding reality, in the sense that he grew more out of touch with the reality that he tried to know.

In more recent times, the concept of rationality is changing again, and we can see that the idea of man's participation in his outer world is gradually replacing the causa sui project, and that the concept of objectivity is being questioned and adapted. However, these earlier ideas on rationality very much continue to colour our perception of the world around us, our Self-definitions and the actions we undertake to structure society, such as economic actions.

### The process of Entzauberung

We can classify science in the high days of Newtonian physics as promoting this specific perception of rationality in terms of a causa sui project by way of objectivity, and hence fully enhancing the process of Entzauberung. The influence of Newtonian physics was to culminate in the claim of Pierre Simon Laplace: "Une intelligence qui, pour un instant donné, connaîtrait toutes les forces dont la nature est animée et la situation respective des êtres qui la composent, si d'ailleurs elle est assez vaste pour soumettre ces données à l'analyse, embrasserait dans la même formule les mouvements des plus grands corps de l'univers et ceux du plus léger atome : rien ne serait incertain pour elle, et l'avenir comme le passé seraient présents à ses yeux"<sup>3</sup>. This quote from Laplace, who lived from 1749 to 1827, is an outstanding example of contemporary views of Newtonian science. Until the end of the 19th century, scientists continued to believe that it was only a matter of time for science to come forward with a *theory of everything*. In the same period, Charles Darwin published his "On the origin of species", another milestone in the development of western science, adding to the success of Newtonian physics, and consolidating the Newtonian worldview. Past, present and future came steadily to be seen as the gradual progress of humanity achieved through its own efforts, rather than inspired by the artful work of some divine plan. Man optimistically thought himself capable of rationally understanding and, at some further stage of development, possibly even mastering nature and society.

This ongoing scientific process also stimulated the demystification of life, according to which the magical and the mythical had to give way to rational and controllable principles for soul-saving. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Tylor was one of several positivist anthropologists who studied other cultures with the indirect aim to clear his own culture of any magic-related perceptions<sup>4</sup>. To become fully human, he argued, man and his culture had to leave behind any irrational beliefs and superstitions.

Strongly intertwined with the previously mentioned consequences of rational thinking is the disenchantment of nature. Traditionally, there was a strong connection between the magical, the religious and nature. People experienced the earth as a living organism, as a mother taking due care of her children. This psychological dependency on the earth has gradually ceased to exist, in part under the influence of such rationalist thinkers as Locke. He reversed the relationship between man and the earth by pointing out that it was not the earth that cared for man, but man who took care of himself by means of his own labour. This approach fostered the view of the earth being 'really' a mass of inert material that is there to be improved by man<sup>5</sup>.

There is another, unintentional way in which the bond between nature and man has weakened, i.e. man no longer depends on his own senses to know the 'truth' about reality as he used to. Achterhuis quotes heavily from Arendt to describe this process, which dates back to the days of Descartes, and which Arendt holds responsible for today's phenomenon of world alienation<sup>6</sup>.

At the turn of the 19th century, the first clouds appeared in the sky in the form of a series of problems that could not readily be described by Newtonian physics. They turned out to be the nightmare of those scientists that had believed in the dream of an ultimate

scientific theory of everything. It was the beginning of the long and difficult birth of quantum mechanics. Rather than merely destroying the universal validity of Newtonian physics, quantum mechanics put forward a worldview that was completely different from Newton's. Heisenberg's uncertainty relations, for example, showed that nature is intrinsically indeterministic. What is more relevant to the subjects discussed in this article, however, is that quantum mechanics proved the concept of 'naive objectivity', as strongly proclaimed by Newtonian science, to be an illusion. According to quantum mechanics, reality is such that in essence the observer is a participant. Even in the case of material measurements, the objects to be measured are affected by the measurements. This new 'indeterminism and participation paradigm' that quantum mechanics was incontestably introducing into the core of man's view of and interaction with nature, only spread slowly as an awareness towards other fields of science. Rather surprisingly, this new paradigm often seemed to have a more profound effect on the layman than on the professional scientist active in a particular field of applied science, especially engineering and medicine. Even today, there are physicians and engineers that will advocate a worldview that is essentially Newtonian. This attitude often reflects a sincere attempt to counteract a variety of confused new age currents that turn the insights brought to us by quantum mechanics to their own use. The ambivalence of the influence of western science on the nature of our contemporary worldview is also due to the fact that today's science itself is highly fragmented. Genetics, which has proved a huge success in the area of biology, is one example of several new and important discoveries that have provoked the old Newtonian belief to raise its head again in the minds of groups of scientists. Our times also see a renewed interest in socio-biology, after this field of study had been neglected for centuries because of its connections with the Third Reich.

To summarise, we can say that although long periods of marked influence by science have stimulated the process of disenchantment, science itself has reintroduced enchantment, through such elements as the uncertainty and participation paradigm from quantum mechanics and other foundational theories (e.g. relativity theory). These new findings and insights are being readily popularised through books, films and TV serials.<sup>7</sup>

However, next to and in parallel with this reenchantment of the public sphere, the more serious social issues, however paradoxical this may seem, are often still dominated by visions that can only be classified within the old-fashioned Newtonian worldview. For example, in our daily economic thinking and acting the Newtonian worldview is still very much present and alive. The concept of makeability and controllability, combined with the idea of 'time is money', makes for a powerful discourse of efficiency and 'rationalisation'. In line with this 'rationalisation' the surrounding physical world is still viewed as a collection of objects that are at our disposal. Lukàcz referred to this phenomenon as 'Verdinglichung': objects in the outer world are presented as merely instrumental in satisfying human needs and pleasures. Adorno and Horkheimer use the telling term of 'instrumental rationality', arguing that not only objects but also humans are now 'used' for a particular purpose. The cheap labour policy of some multinationals is an example of how rationality has been reduced to instrumental rationality, in which there is no more place for 'Vernunft'. Of course we are aware of the competition element in this example, but our purpose here is to point out particular perceptions of reality may have unintended side-effects. Where rationality takes man to the point of conducting *causa sui* projects in terms of controllability, makeability and objectivity, his relationship with his socio-physical environment is thus 'naturally' reduced to the merely instrumental.

On the personal level, the consequence is a decrease in meaningfulness. To followers of such instrumental view, the opposite attitude of self-sacrifice and trust in support from a source that is outside and transcends the Self, is naive. Interpreting rationality in this manner, man has ceased to be capable of relating to, being situated in, or orienting himself towards his natural surroundings.

Weber was early to understand that this viewpoint would make life a difficult task to accomplish. He observed that to modern man, particularly the younger generations, it would be hard to be proof against a daily reality that is characterised by disenchantment. According to Weber, the pursuit of inner experiences characteristic of modern man can be traced back to

his weakness of not being prepared to face the fate of contemporary time in its true appearance.<sup>8</sup>

>From a different perspective, however, the incapacity to depict reality in terms of mere concrete objectivity is not necessarily a sign of weakness. It may well point to the importance of man's need to orient himself towards or situate himself in a transcendent whole. By transcendence we mean that which we cannot appropriate. Indeed, the postulate expressed in this paper is that this is a primary need in man. This means that the 'pursuit of inner experiences' is nothing but an attempt to fill the gap that has been created in his experiences. If reality has lost much of its traditional meaningfulness, and if we have a fundamental need to link ourselves to a wider whole, we will have to recover meaning by orienting ourselves to or situating ourselves within a newly created, meaningful reality.

In this light we might reinterpret Marx' commodity fetishism, according to which people fall under the spell of and submit to their own trade activities. We might also revise Girard's<sup>9</sup> concept of the mimetic desire, as well as its modern adaptation, i.e. the everlasting rivalry between men to achieve more and better (of whatever). The accumulation of wealth is still highly regarded in our society. It may well be that anyone following this route, for example by imitating highly successful idols, is in fact expressing a fundamental and intrinsic need to orient or situate themselves in a broader reality.

We do not deny that this approach to linking one's life to a transcending reality may be conducive to finding meaning in life, but we do consider this to be only a limited variant of meaningfulness, since the meaning and enjoyment that can be derived from a high economic status, for example, are intrinsically limited to complacency and self-enjoyment. In our view, it is therefore important to bring back to the fore a framework serving as a set of references and not intended to impose restrictions<sup>10</sup>. Instead, such a framework should consist of an ethical horizon, a socio-cultural horizon and a physical horizon. The rational acknowledgement of the 'truth' of these horizons may facilitate the acceptance or recognition of the existing inner experience of being situated in, or linked with a self-transcending reality, as opposed to today's detached stance. This in turn may stimulate our involvement with these horizons on the concrete level, since we tend to be more inclined to care for what is acknowledged as being important to us.

Before elaborating on this idea, we will briefly discuss the effect of the other elements of the Human Self that are perceived as building blocks.

## **1.2. Other building blocks considered important**

The idea of self-development being the essence of human life comes natural to contemporary man. It suggests that people can find true self-realisation in an independent and autonomous fashion. The process is two-fold: in addition to reaching self-realisation, the aim is to do so in freedom.

The idea of freedom is of central importance here because of a cluster of ideas about 'being'. Man is seen as an authentic being with a potential bundle of ideas, thoughts and feelings waiting there to be developed. These potentialities are situated in our inner, unexplored depth, as opposed to a reality of objects external to man. Articulating this bundle of capacities, expressing his own origin-ality, is what is felt to be the essence of man (Taylor, 1989)<sup>11</sup>.

In this view of man, according to which such qualities as creativity, but also criticism and a sense of truth, come *from within*, the individual is able to make choices at any time, including choices on values, and do so in a fully rational and independent manner, without being influenced in any way. It follows then that he and he alone is responsible for these choices.

With personal development predominantly sprouting from man's inner Self, the state and the community are no longer considered to play a decisive role in bringing about self-realisation. Man is now in a position to dissociate himself from his community, loosening the tie that used to link him to it and feeling less inclined to assume responsibilities for it.

Sandel and other communitarists contend that these liberal ideas of the Self overstress the 'unencumbered Self', i.e. a subject whose identity does not depend on specific interests, objectives and relationships with others (Sandel, 1982).<sup>12</sup> It is precisely the liberal interpretation that takes us to the view of man as an antisocial being.

Economic-scientific thinking about 'progress' further supported the view of self-realisation as self-centredness. Prominent economists such as Adam Smith and J. M. Keynes provided a rational basis for the concept of competition and the principle of healthy self-interest. Self-interest and competition, by driving economic growth, were supposed eventually to be in the interest of all. The idea was that if everybody embarked on an individual journey to pursue maximum satisfaction of their own material needs, this would ultimately benefit the entire population. It was assumed that these vices would be overcome by virtues once abundance was achieved, i.e. after a dark age of one hundred years. According to Keynes, until that moment, people had to persuade themselves into believing that 'fair is foul, and foul is fair, for foul is useful, and fair is not. Greed, usury and precaution will have to be our gods for a long while. For only they are able to guide us out of the tunnel of economic need into the daylight' (Ophuls, 1973)<sup>13</sup>.

Current philosophical theories based on Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill postulate, broadly speaking, that people are psychologically constructed in such a way that the exclusive object of their desire is pleasure; and that, from an ethical perspective, they are under a moral obligation to maximise pleasure and happiness. There is no highest good in pleasure and happiness. Some of these theories go even further, claiming that the core of being is our ability to do and think whatever we decide is right. The only restriction imposed at the moment we proceed to actually implement our wishes is the integrity of others.

Opposed to the notions that locate sense and meaning within ourselves is the idea based on the view still held by certain groups of scientist who continue to champion old-fashioned Newtonian ideas. Their theories state that man is almost completely determined by natural or psychological forces external to himself; leaving precious little room for the free will. The idea that we are material beings subject to physical processes is having the opposite effect of man perceiving himself as deprived of meaning, as sense-less. Disenchantment in rational terms is not only affecting the outside world, but also our selves, so that we can no longer find sense, neither in ourselves nor in the outer world.

### Effects

Like the notions about being, their effects are multiple. We can roughly divide them into two developments. The first is that of people implementing the modern self-definition and trying to find meaning in it. In its deprivileged form this leads to the practice coined by the sociologist Elchardus as 'the ethics of limitlessness'. The combination of self-development as the unfolding of inner originality at the exclusive discretion of the individual on the one hand, and the economics-inspired beliefs of self-centredness on the other, reinforces and justifies the perception of self-realisation as egocentricity. Here, the longing for freedom equals the desire to do away with any and all institutional and social restrictions, including solidarity with the community, for even that is felt to be a condition. The individual will enter into social relationships only in so far as they favour his own self-development, such relationships having acquired a purely instrumental nature. Elchardus' research shows that initially leftist progressives mainly advocated the ideal of freeing oneself from all ties and flying in the face of established norms. However, as a group they lived up to implicit, very strict standards that imposed 'natural' restrictions on their dealings with fellow men, society and their physical environment. Over the last few decades, a growing part of the population has radically extended this libertarian ideal, demanding indiscriminate respect for their feelings, whether legitimate or gross, opening the door to unfettered egotism, racism and xenophobia<sup>14</sup>.

Not all people feel attracted by these building blocks for self-definition, but we will have to make shift with them, since the model does not offer any alternatives. However, if,

like Frankl says, meaning is the driving force of life, people who fail to find meaning in the modern model will suffer from existential meaninglessness<sup>15</sup>. This process may gain additional momentum under the influence of scientific determinism and today's disenchantment process.

As said before, in our view the search for meaning should very much include the search for ways of being situated in and orienting oneself towards a surpassing whole. Existential meaninglessness may be one outcome of today's detached perception, which fundamentally ignores this need for a transcendental link. Today's search for meaningfulness may, however, result in self-affirmation by way of what we have called a 'minor' form of transcendence.

On a related subject, Burms gives an interesting example. He states that a narcissist person will continually see himself from the point of view of others. It is not his intention to know this viewpoint to turn it to his own advantage through manipulation or use. He rather identifies with an ideal, an ideal that in a sense transcends him. For Burms, this and other examples go to show that one will inevitably aspire for recognition on a *direct* basis to the extent that one is not able to feel deeply linked with anything transcending.<sup>16</sup>

## **2. Adjusting the modern perception of man**

In this second part we will set out to adjust the prevailing perceptions of man and his relation to the world he lives in. New perceptions will entail new perspectives on 'truths', and by gaining new insights into the truth about ourselves and the world we live in, we may possibly enhance our existential well-feeling and, more generally, help resolve today's social and environmental issues.

### **2.1. The ontological ethics of the human being**<sup>17</sup>

In the era in which we live, the options open to man for his self-realisation are largely held to be confined to the development of an inner core, rationality, and hedonism. In line with Levinas' views, we claim as 'truth' that man is in essence – ontologically – an ethical being. This implies that man has an existential need for responsibility. Insofar as he is not consciously aware of that need, he may sense the world and his own life as meaningless.

According to Levinas, we can know consciously only the past and the future (by anticipation). The mind process is static in the sense that it refers to only one particular condition, whereas life is in constant flux. The human consciousness has no capacity for grasping the present, for as soon as it happens, it gives way to a new present. It is only through reflection – an act of consciousness in hindsight – that we become aware of these moments having existed. The past is made present by the human consciousness, but never completely so. We never succeed in grasping the full extent of the present, which partially escapes from our consciousness. In its profoundest sense, consciousness is memory.

This incapability of the consciousness to 'get hold of' the present is key to the remainder of this paper. The appeal of other humans, i.e. that which makes us ethical beings, reaches us at the very moment that escapes our conscious control and that we call the present. Other people break into ourselves, claiming us, without our giving permission, and without the 'claimant's' feeling this to be an act of claiming. We never asked for that other person's entering our reality, but there is no way we can escape. It is a pre-reflective and passive event.

The fact that we are sensitive to this appeal of vulnerability at all, sprouts from the very nature of human life, based as it is on shared existence and shared experiences, on what Levinas refers to as our 'going together' (see below). We consider our own lives to be a fundamentally valuable asset, we are attached to our lives, and this self-attachment is something we enjoy and that enables us to enjoy ourselves. In essence, this enjoyment boils down to the experience of having control over the reality that surrounds us. At the same time

we feel vulnerable because we are aware of our own dependence. When ill or in pain, we feel locked inside ourselves, out of control, helplessly at the mercy of others.

This appeal of vulnerability, i.e. other people's breaking into ourselves, pulls us away from our suffering and enjoyment. Our attention is claimed by this appeal. Our focus turns to the other person, who is now no longer perceived as an extension of our joy, or consolation for our suffering, but rather as an individual Self beyond our own Selves. That individual person pulls us away from our centre, indeed, away from ourselves. We are called upon to respond. It is this ability to respond, this 'respons-ability', to other people's unsolicited and unintentional calls that *ontologically* makes us ethical beings. These calls arouse a latent aspiration in ourselves that is stronger than our desire or need for enjoyment: the aspiration for responsibility. The difference between the one and the other is that the desire does and the aspiration does not originate from a lack of satisfaction. In the case of the aspiration for responsibility, it is not ourselves that is the object but the other person.

We are free to respond or not to respond to this appeal. The choice is made at the conscious level, a prerequisite for justice. In doing so, we continually engage in deliberations about our choices, which Levinas believes are autonomous. In our view, however, these choices are less autonomous than Levinas supposes them to be. Any person's opinions are formed not only by themselves but under the influence of the community (see below). The modern discourse of self-definition stresses the ideal of liberation and development of the Self. It stimulates man to rationally and consciously opt for 'self-enjoyment first' as the supposedly right choice.

In theory, this should leave us with a society dominated by egocentric beings, but practical reality is different. The reason for this is the universal – but largely unrecognised – aspiration for responsibility referred to above. In other words, there is a very significant discrepancy between man's implicit everyday experience of his Self as an ethical being on the one hand, and, on the other, the modern building blocks for self-definition that are placed at his disposal.

If we wish to bring about a more ethical society, our main focus should shift from a change of man to an adjustment of the discourse, and do full justice again to the ontological ethics of man.

## **2.2. Transcending horizons**

A second split concerns that between, on the one hand, how we experience ourselves, i.e. as being situated in and oriented towards a transcending ethical, socio-cultural and physical surrounding, and, on the other, the modern building blocks for self-definition, which are presented as detached from these surroundings. This division is partly responsible for today's problems on the socio-cultural level and the level of personal meaningfulness.

Our vision is that the acknowledgement of the horizons referred to above will further man's commitment and deepen and broaden his sense of meaningfulness. It is vital to bring them to the fore again, which is the purpose of the remainder of this paper. Before we do that, we will first give a summary of the ideas of 'being situated', and 'broader meaningfulness'.

### **Being situated in or oriented to: Levinas' principle of going together but not coinciding .**

The expressions 'being situated in', and 'oriented towards', may strike followers of the detached way of thinking as pointing to a life of dependency on a family, a group, a traditional culture, a nation or even animist nature. They may be led to believe that these terms require them to coincide with any of these external groups uncritically.

We definitely wish to make clear that such a supposition would be incorrect. The expressions 'being situated in' and 'oriented towards' refer neither to detaching nor to coinciding, but rather to a position in between these two. They refer to 'going together'<sup>18</sup>. It is Levinas who laid the foundations for this view.

Levinas thinks in terms of differences. He criticises modern thinking for its totalising views and its premise of a single, fundamental truth. He also criticizes the opposite viewpoint for its relativising approach, which cannot but lead to the view of differences being of no relevance, and hence to indifference. Levinas builds his case in between these two opposite extremes. In his view, it is of overriding importance to recognise and appreciate existing differences. Although these differences are absolute and therefore non-reducible, he argues, they are no impediment to establishing bonds.

One of the subjects that Levinas deals with in greater detail to elucidate his thesis, is the split ego. It is impossible for us to observe both the observing Self and the acting Self at the same time. The question is who does the looking when we are looking at ourselves. The observing, 'living' Self is looking at the observed, objectivised Self. Are they one and the same Self? It would seem that they have to be, for we experience ourselves as single, unified beings. On the other hand, we also experience two different, split up selves. Whilst we go together with ourselves, i.e. we are equal, we do not wholly coincide with ourselves, i.e. we are different. This phenomenon becomes manifest in the differences between our concrete experiences. We suffer but we are not the suffering; we enjoy ourselves, but we are not the enjoyment. We are capable of observing our suffering and enjoyment from a distance at any time, and yet we feel the pain and the pleasure to be essentially linked up with our *entire* Selves. This double nature is us - we go together with the suffering and pleasure without coinciding.

The same principle applies to other people, for they too are felt to be split up. Although we can see them, we can never fully know them. This occurs in the case of an ethical appeal, for the other's appeal takes us away from our self-centred enjoyment, making us aware of the other as more than a mere instrument to satisfy our own needs. The other person is now no longer reduced to the state of coinciding with ourselves. Quite the contrary, we recognise the absolute differences between the other and ourselves, differences that we cannot pinpoint because they transcend our own Self. Yet does it remain possible for us to establish a bond, to go together with the other. Without such a bond, it would be impossible to enter into a relationship or to reach understanding. Ethical behaviour is conditional upon this ability to go together, but also on the absolute difference, the individual independence, i.e. the non-coinciding. This going together without coinciding is what we mean by being situated in, and oriented to, and is what we will intend to clarify in the following section in the light of the ethical horizon, the socio-cultural horizon and the physical horizon.

### **The importance of the transcendent for ethical behaviour and broader meaningfulness**

The building blocks that are to enable modern man to fulfil his life – although not necessarily man himself!- are largely inspired by utilitarian ideas, upholding that it is or should be up to ourselves what choice to make and what to consider important, through an act of self-affirmation. What is meaningful is one's own business, something that is not under discussion, as long as it does not harm the integrity of others. The role of society is to provide the means to make life pleasant and worthwhile.

However, in this particular perception of meaningfulness, the crucial role of the transcendental has disappeared out of sight. What we can see is but a limited version of meaningfulness, however important that may be. To become aware of a broader meaningfulness, we have to bring into daylight the two transcendental levels of meaningfulness. Recognizing them is a prerequisite for accepting the transcending horizons and our being situated in it.

The first level of transcendence, which is on the cultural level, makes clear that what is appealing to us is not just the product of our inner wishes needing to be fulfilled. Quite the contrary. As Burms and De Dijn carefully line out: our choices for self-affirmation - through choices in professions, social roles, certain sports - are largely pre-determined by cultural constellations. We definitely respond to a particular framework of cultural references according to which some elements of reality are meaningful, and other elements are not. The

active pursuit willed by the individual is preceded by passive receptivity. Thus, for anything to be meaningful it must be capable of appealing<sup>19</sup>. We will adhere to anything only after we have recognised it as 'good' or 'right'.

This is the very reason why the existence of an ethical, a socio-cultural and a physical transcending horizon is hard to recognise. Specific combinations of the building blocks contained in man's life construction kit unintendedly make the other blocks unattractive. On a level prior to choice, these blocks fail to have a clear appeal to us.

Burms also points to another, intrinsically related phenomenon of meaningfulness. For something to be meaningful it must structurally *escape* our manipulation. We can only experience as fascinating something that we have not been able to integrate into our plans or expectations, something that we experience as surpassing our own will. A reversal of this phenomenon sheds light on the consequences of the opposite, i.e. a decrease of meaning is implied in the idea of man autonomously defining and controlling the meaning of his life. The controllability of the world makes it more predictable – and hence sense-reduced. It is only when we assess anything as valuable and not dependent on ourselves that it can be meaningful. And when it is meaningful to our inner experience, we will be more inclined to take care of it.

The second level of transcendence is the level discussed by Levinas and, in different terms, also by Burms. This is the level of the pre-reflective, the pre-historical and the pre-cultural. It is at this level that man is 'touched', as Levinas puts it. By this he understands a particular feeling<sup>20</sup> that is inextricably bound up with an appeal for ethics. It is essential for man to admit these feelings if he is to experience at all that he is a part of a transcending horizon, and to exploit the potential of an enlarged involvement. In discussing the horizons, we will sometimes deviate from Levinas' view that these moments of being touched constitute an appeal by another person.

As we have seen, in addition to reasserting the importance and existence of a transcendental dimension, we need to revisualise another basic fact: for life to have meaning, people must peremptorily be able to orient themselves towards, or situate themselves in a transcendent reality. Burms expresses the same view in different terms by stating that people have an ineradicable tendency to worship<sup>21</sup>. The denial of this anthropological fact and of the existence of a transcendental horizon will cause man to unconsciously adhere to the minor meaningful transcending horizon referred to above. Examples are the importance that many attach to economic status, to how other people think about us, and to fame or at least to being acquainted with famous people. The phrase used by Burms to describe these forms of keeping up appearances is 'expressions of an immediate desire for affirmation', which, he says, may give rise to feelings of anxiety, because of a continuous concern about other people's opinions<sup>22</sup>. These attempts at self-affirmation can be considered to be made on rather unstable grounds for offering but a 'minor' horizon.

On the other hand, the acknowledgment of man's need for a transcendental link would open possibilities for gaining better insights into its nature and elementary attributes. This could result in man's 'true' autonomy, in which he is aware of his connection with a transcending horizon to which he can voluntarily and consciously adhere. Such a broader meaningfulness may also be reached by further insights into the fundamental importance of man's ontological aspiration for responsibility. If man sees himself as part of a broader horizon and as an ethical being, he will potentially be more likely to find a stable form of self-affirmation. As Burms formulates it: 'It is this relationship with what we cannot appropriate to ourselves, which makes us conscious of being in touch with our true Self'<sup>23</sup>.

Our vision of meaningfulness leaves room for its minor version, but makes an urgent appeal not to consider it the only source of meaning. For this could lead us to start from an *instrumental* attitude in our relations with others and the environment.

The acknowledgment of the existence of other, broader sources for meaningfulness could open the way for man to adopt a fundamental attitude of *commitment* to others and the world around him. This would still allow for instrumental relationships, albeit on a more limited scale.

In the following sections we will make an attempt to show that it is necessary for man to become aware again of the importance of his inner experiences of going together but not coinciding with a transcending reality. If we can make explicit the implicit - the transcendental component of the ethical, the socio-cultural and the natural - and make plausible that we are a part of them, we may contribute to a fundamental self-affirmation and to the improved well-being of man and his environment.

### The ethical horizon

The modern view of man makes us believe that the meaning of life is to remove external obstacles so as to exploit the potential of our inner core. In doing this, we are expected to respect other people's moral choices. The choices people make to achieve this cannot be weighed against each other, since there are no collectively held standards any more. Any individual's chosen value is good or bad only because he has opted for adopting it. What remains is the bottom-line of regulatory rights and duties. Anything above that is free choice. In theory, in making his choices, man is free to adopt a rationalised and self-centred attitude. In practice, however, people rarely do so, but instead allow themselves to be guided by that which they *implicitly* feel to be morally 'good'. In condemning disgusting practices such as child pornography, people feel they are not merely 'expressing their own opinion', but implicitly regard their intuition as telling them what is the 'right' transcending value to be followed.

It is Taylor's great merit to have restored this implicit framework to our conscience. Taylor recognises a number of hyper values - which he calls 'hypergoods' - or ideals that support our concept of a life that is worthwhile. These hypergoods are subconscious, collective model functions undergoing only very gradual change through time under the influence of socio-cultural circumstances. They are independent of our will, tendencies and choices. Examples of hypergoods are the importance of family life, autonomy, human dignity, and the need for combating pain and suffering.

Through his work, Taylor is weaving a link between moral orientation and identity. He argues that for their basic 'being' people have a need to be connected to or in contact with what they deem fundamental. Being oriented to 'the good' is essential for humans to be acting beings, to have an identity. Sensing the good is related to sensing the Self. It is impossible to live without such a framework of qualitative distinctions. It is only from a horizon 'of the good' that, in each individual case, we can determine what to do, what we stand for, or what we want to react against. According to Taylor, stepping from moral space is stepping from humanity.

Inescapably, people will look for meaning, always. This quest is in itself inevitable and defines us as human beings. So the questions of 'what kind of life is worth living' or 'who am I' are not optional. It takes a while for anyone to find out which values in his or her lives are stable or variable. This requires a process of growing awareness and searching. However, a person's identity will widen once he has learned how to articulate the values that are important to him, that drive him. His ability to approach this ideal will also widen his identity, for the very reason that his own values or ideals contribute to the larger, collective project (Taylor, 1989).<sup>24</sup>

In bringing back the transcendental element to the fore it becomes clear that humans are not their narrow selves, making choices exclusively on their own, as portrayed by our modern building blocks. An awareness of being situated in and linked to this transcending ethical horizon will contribute to perceiving ourselves in a broader manner.

Recognising the transcending horizon is not synonymous with coinciding. Taylor perceives the ethical framework as a cultural collectivity which transcends us. However, this modern framework only provides open advice. Terms such as benevolence and justice are familiar to all of us, but in our times they lack a clear definition. People have to define and redefine these basic concepts for themselves. This articulation is part of modern man's search

for meaning. Nowadays, meaning is dependent on our powers of expression. The discovery of the transcendental framework and our awareness of it are interwoven with our capacity to give these hypergoods a place and a new meaning.

To enable a rational perception of the 'going together experience as 'true', Taylor sets out to demonstrate that morality and values are not relative and that our choices are not merely personal. Morality is derived from a meaningful order in the first place. Although this order is not rooted in 'being' as such, and although these values may change over time - 'honour', for example, has lost at least part of its relevance in our days - even so it is possible to develop objective, dynamic standards. They are not objective in external-descriptive terms, for they remain essentially human. Rather, they are objective from an internal-participative perspective. Taylor takes objectivity to be a 'Best Account principle', i.e. people will stick to their viewpoint of 'best value' until it is refuted. He considers this to be a legitimate process, for even scientists are aware that facts, despite their provisional nature, are felt to be 'true'.

Interesting too is that Taylor points to the fact that moral values are not so much refuted by rational arguments. On the contrary, values and ideas 'do' something to us, we are 'touched' by them. There is something that appeals to us, and if reflection triggers inner change, we find that we have morally 'improved'. For people to undergo moral change, they need to be touched, not convinced by rational arguments.

### The socio-cultural horizon

According to the modern view of man, the relationship between the community or society and the individual is not a mutual relationship but one that requires only one way, i.e. from the group to the individual. Society is expected to create the right conditions, and facilitate adequate social structures, for the individual to be able to develop his inner core. The individual needs society as an intermediary, but society does not participate in the individual's self-development. Quite the contrary, as we said at the outset, in cognitive terms individuals may now perceive their obligations to social or other group networks rather as obstacles on the road towards their independence and autonomy.

Reality is different, however, because *experience* tells us that we are not atom-like separate beings. In fact, depending on place and context, we invariably see ourselves as belonging to a particular family, social stratum, a group, a culture, or a nation.<sup>25</sup> Inherent in 'being human' is the capacity to be situated in a socio-spatial room of past, present and future. The question of 'who am I' is inextricably linked up with the question of 'where do I belong'.

The crucial relevance of this socio-spatial room to our self-definition becomes clear only the moment we have to do without all these elements that we take for granted, as appears from a study conducted by the anthropologist Eugène Roosens on the Huron Indians in Canada. Forced to move and having lost their common stories and culture, this tribe created a new myth of origin with specific indications of their descent (Roosens).<sup>26</sup> This restored to the individual members a common past and identity from which to rebuild their own personal identities.

The implicit must necessarily be made explicit again. The current view of the human Self is telling us only part of the story. Our decisions on what we wish to be bound by do not depend only on ourselves, and our deepest identifications are not those with which we voluntarily agree. Our choices are not entirely free because we belong to a community. We are subject to another mechanism at a deeper level: prior to making up our mind, we have already *received* meaningfulness. We receive meaning as much as we give it, for it is erroneous to believe that we are self-reliant.

Once we rediscover our attachment, we can start to experience its full significance. Discovering this attachment *is* the experience of transcendental reality. If we admit this experience and recognise our dependence on the transcendent, we will be able to increase

our commitment to society. People will not commit to anything with which they cannot identify themselves at least partially.

Attachment and coinciding are two different things. As Burms puts it: if attachment is equated with coinciding, it runs the risk of being perverted, of being misused.<sup>27</sup> Examples of this are the rhetoric of fundamentalism and the rhetoric of extreme rightist parties. If an individual's identity goes together with that of the group to the extent of wholly coinciding with it, the result will be an intolerant 'we-perspective'.

Hence the importance of Levinas' principle of experiencing ourselves as being simultaneously a part of and separated from a transcendental reality. This idea has been elaborated by Maalouf with regard to identity and culture.

According to Maalouf, our identity is not innate but made. It transforms throughout our lives. Our self-image is formed as much by our closest relatives as by those that are remotest and hold us in low regard. In this view, to live is to find a way between driving forces and apparent prohibitions. It is these two opposite forces, as well as the bruises they cause, that determine our sense of affiliation with a particular group.

Maalouf is concerned with understanding this mechanism. Identity, he says, should be seen as made up of different 'affiliations', such as language, religion, political beliefs and nationality. These affiliations are not restricted to a single group but, depending on their nature and context, also to other groups. At the same time, Maalouf points out that the more affiliations an individual becomes aware of, the clearer his self-perception as an individual will become.<sup>28</sup>

On the one hand, Maalouf confirms a degree of autonomy. Individuals will never completely coincide with a group. We will always be capable of autonomous reflections, of making choices and assuming responsibilities, so there is no need to fear being dragged along by the group's choice. On the other hand, he shows that a sense of belonging is important to identity. In his interpretation, however, this belonging is multiple, so that there is not a single group with which to identify, but various groups. This view incites us to perceive ourselves, in rational and cognitive terms, as part of wider and possibly worldwide groups, which in turn would stimulate potential commitment.

### The physical horizon

Economic rationality, objectivity, the idea of hedonism, and other building blocks – including but not limited to those we have mentioned in this paper – imply a dissociated relationship between man and nature, and relegate nature to the condition of tangible reality in the here and now. On a *cognitive* level, these ideas favour an instrumental stance. However, this view ignores the fact that man's recognition of his 'being situated in' a wider reality plays a fundamental role in the process of making him responsible and committed.

Whilst on a cognitive level we are stimulated to see nature as lifeless, at the *level of experience* even individuals holding the above rational view will at times be touched by nature. A moment of peaceful reflection during a mountain walk; outdoor breakfast on a quiet sunlit morning; a walk through the woods at dusk along a meandering trail; the sudden appearance of a deer, fox or boar – these are all examples of situations in which we may be 'touched' by nature.

This being touched is essential for ethical behaviour. It is an experience different from the experience of joy, in which we see nature as a continuation of ourselves. Being touched is the experience of the transcendental element of nature. It is the experience that nature is *not* mere outer reality, but something transcending ourselves. It is the sudden, unexpected experience of being part of nature. According to Levinas, this being touched is 1. a feeling and 2. an appeal for ethics<sup>29</sup>. At such moments of linkedness, we sense that we are receiving energy and strength, which is translated into the possibility of responding, the responsibility. It furthers an urge to care.

Being touched by nature then is a pre-historical, pre-cultural and pre-conscious event, because it is an immediate experience, something we receive in the immediate present. We become aware of it a fraction of a second later, on a conscious, cultural level. However,

because the complex combination of the building blocks tend to pull us towards seeing nature as there for our use, and to see ourselves as its stewards, we might not be sufficiently aware of the full meaning of these moments of appeal and regard them as 'negligible'. Once again it becomes clear how deep the gap is between our implicit inner experiences and the current building blocks for defining the human Self.

To permit these inner experiences to be judged as 'true', it is indispensable for us to be able to consider ourselves as part of the environment on a cognitive base as well. This presupposes tackling the problem of detachment to the core. To achieve this, the age-old dichotomy between the mind and the world 'outside us' will have to be resolved. Several contemporary philosophers have undertaken major attempts to overcome this dualism. One of them is Davidson, who rejects the whole Kantian idea of a conceptual scheme.

In Kant's view, 'outside' reality is assumed to reach us in an unordered manner, to be ordered by us into concepts. Our intellectual capacity presents us with a 'general' idea to meaningfully organise the specificities of disparate impressions. This implies that we cannot know reality as it is but only as it appears to us, i.e. subject to the universal structuring activity of man's consciousness<sup>30</sup>.

Davidson denies the suggestion that we receive data through the senses in an unordered manner (objective contributions) to be structured by our *mind* (subjective contribution). According to Davidson, the way in which the external world comes to us through the senses is already organised, individualised and conceptualised. Our mind only adds colours to this world, but only within definite boundaries<sup>31</sup>.

The ideas of Davidson, although deeply rooted in his philosophy, are rather speculative from a scientific point of view. Traditional research in cognition seems to start from the opposite hypothesis, but largely does so with a bias. Recent work in cognition at the Leo Apostel Centre opens the possibility for concepts, the building blocks of cognition, to appear as entities independent of and preexisting to any human cognitive act<sup>32</sup>. We should add that this, of course, is only one of several possible interpretations of this work on cognition, and that a traditional interpretation remains possible. It would be interesting to conceive of future experiments to test aspects of this type of speculative hypothesis.

Reflections and evolutions like these are gradually causing cracks in the perception of outside reality that we have been criticizing, and enable us to work towards a new enchantment of man's worldview. They may help us discover that ethical, socio-cultural and physical horizons do exist, and that we belong to them, a discovery that is primordial for realising our broader human - ethical - Selves.

### **3. Conclusion**

This article intends to reinforce the ethical dimension of the human being. Putting the homo ethicus on the same level as the homo economicus and the homo ludens is no warranty for ethical behaviour in daily life, so we need to understand that we are enshrined in a framework that is ethical, socio-cultural and physical. Again, an enhanced linkage with the outside world is no guarantee for man's acting ethically, but will only result in *potential* ethical acting. Acceptance of the ethical human Self and the transcending horizons as 'real' on the cultural and conscious levels particularly impacts the level of deliberation. The many factors that are considered in this process will now include ethics. We assume that in many cases, but not all cases, this will actually have an influence on people's behaviour. The change is potential because it does not require making sacrifices: man is free to choose.

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<sup>1</sup> Important authors are Frankfurt, H.; *The importance of what we care about*, Cambridge University Press, 1997 (1988) and Kane, R.; *Free Will*, Blackwell Publishers, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Ch.; *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> If an intelligence that, at a given moment, would know all the forces by which Nature is animated, and the respective situation of all the elements of which it is composed, was furthermore powerful enough to be capable of analysing all these data, it would encompass in a single expression the motions of the largest bodies of the Universe, as well as those of the lightest atom: nothing would

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be uncertain to it, and both past and future would be present to its eyes.

Laplace, P. S.; *Théorie analytique des probabilités*, Laplace Œuvres, Tome VII, (3e édition, 1820 + 4 suppléments), volumes I et II, 1847, Editions Jacques Gabay, Paris.

- <sup>4</sup> Lemaire, T.; (in Dutch) *Over de Waarde van kulturen. Een inleiding in de kultuurfilosofie*, Ambo-Reprint, 1976, p. 241.
- <sup>5</sup> Locke, J.; par. 41, *Second Treatise. Two treatises of government*. Everyman's Library, London, 1982 (1690).
- <sup>6</sup> Achterhuis, H.; (in Dutch) *Natuur tussen mythe en techniek*, Ambo, Baarn 1995, p. 110.
- <sup>7</sup> A great many popular science books have re-enchanted man's existence starting with 'What is life', written by Erwin Schrödinger in the 1940-ies. Schrödinger is one of the founding fathers of quantum mechanics, and his book is alleged to have been a source of inspiration for James Watson and Francis Crick in their quest for the structure of DNA. This marvellous history is recounted by James Watson in his 'In Search of the Double Helix', one of the more recent stories devoured by the general public. The dissemination of popular scientific ideas entered a new era when television became interested in the matter. We think of the many, mostly BBC series, following Charles Bronowsky's original 'The Ascent of Man'. We can also point to the exploitation of archetypical science models by the popular entertainment business in films such as Star Trek, Star Wars, The Matrix, and many other, often fascinating philosophical questions about the nature of our world and man's place in and relation with this world are put forward. We will give some references where one of the authors of this article contributed to this way of dissemination: Aerts, D.; (in Dutch) *De Muze van het Leven: Quantummechanica en de aard van de werkelijkheid*, Pelckmans, Kapellen, Agora Kok, Kampen, 1993, Aerts, D., *The game of the biomousa: a view of discovery and creation*, in *Perspectives on the World: An Interdisciplinary Reflection*, VUBPress, Brussels, 1994, Aerts, D., *Participating in the world: research and education in a changing society*, in *Science, Technology and Social Change*, eds. Aerts, D., Gutwirth, S., Smets, S. and Van Langenhove, L., Kluwer Academic, Dordrecht.
- <sup>8</sup> Weber, M.; (in Dutch) *Wetenschap als beroep en roeping*, E. Tellegen, Samson, Antwerp, 1970 1918), p. 24.
- <sup>9</sup> See his important work on mimetic theory : Girard, R.; *Deceit, Desire and the Novel : Self and Other in Literature*, Baltimore, the John Hopkins University Press, 1965 (French : 1961).
- <sup>10</sup> This term was first used by Depuydt, A.; (in Dutch) *Te gek om los te lopen. Losweg enkele mijmeringen*, Institute for Psycho-Social education, Kortrijk, 1986, p. 51, unpublished.
- <sup>11</sup> Taylor Ch.; *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, part II, chapter 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Sandel, M.; *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. Cambridge, 1982, p. 55, pp. 149-152.
- <sup>13</sup> Ophuls, W.; *Ecology and the policy of scarcity*. Freeman, San Francisco, 1977, p. 235.
- <sup>14</sup> Elchardus, M.; (in Dutch) *Op de ruïnes van de waarheid. Lezingen over tijd, politiek en cultuur*, Kritik, 1994, p. 152.
- <sup>15</sup> Frankl, E., *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, Perseus Publishing, 1997, Chapter 1.
- <sup>16</sup> Burms, A.; (in Dutch) *Het ware Zelf*, p. 4; in : Breeur, R. & Burms, A.; *Ik/Zelf. Essays over identiteit en Zelfbewustzijn* Peeters, 2000.
- <sup>17</sup> This section was written in collaboration with Jan Keij and is based on the following of his books: Keij, J.; (in Dutch), *De structuur van Levinas' denken*, Kampen, 1992; Keij, J.; (in Dutch) *Emmanuel Levinas: variatie op een thema*, Kampen 1994; Keij, J.; (in Dutch) *Zekerheid over Onzekerheid* Elsevier, 1998.
- <sup>18</sup> Levinas uses the term 'séparation'
- <sup>19</sup> Burms, A.; (in Dutch) *Humanisme en de ervaring van zin*, p.45 in : Van derWal, G.A.(ed.): *Vragen naar zin*, Ambo, 1992.
- <sup>20</sup> According to Levinas, this is not located in the area of emotion, since emotion is still in the area of conscience.
- <sup>21</sup> Burms A., *ibid.* p. 45
- <sup>22</sup> Burms, A.; (in Dutch) *Autonomie: het ideal van een narcistische cultuur*, p. 20 ; in : Breeur, R. & Burms, A.; *Ik/Zelf. Essays over identiteit en Zelfbewustzijn*, Peeters, 2000.
- <sup>23</sup> Burms, A.; (in Dutch) *Het ware Zelf*, p.6 in : Breeur, R. & Burms, A.; *Ik/Zelf. Essays over identiteit en Zelfbewustzijn*, Peeters, 2000.
- <sup>24</sup> Taylor, Ch., *The sources of the Self*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, chapters 2 and 3.
- <sup>25</sup> Taylor, Ch., *Ibid.*, p. 35
- <sup>26</sup> Roosens, E., *Creating Ethnicity, The process of Ethogenesis*, Sage Publications, 1989, pp. 45-73

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- <sup>27</sup> Burms, A.; (in Dutch) *Het eigene*, p. 143, in: Breeur, R. & Burms, A.; I/Self, Essays about Identity and Self-consciousness, Peeters, 2000.
- <sup>28</sup> Maalouf, A., *Les Identités meurtrières*, Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1998.
- <sup>29</sup> When talking about 'appeal', Levinas only refers to the human appeal. In this sense we deviate from Levinas.
- <sup>30</sup> Johnson, M., *The body in the mind*, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. xxviii
- <sup>31</sup> Davidson, D., *On the very idea of a conceptual scheme*, in: *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* Oxford, 1984.
- <sup>32</sup> Gabora, L. and Aerts, D., *Contextualizing concepts*, in Proceedings of the 15<sup>th</sup> International FLAIRS Conference ( Special Track 'Categorization and Concept Representation : Models and Implications'), Pensacola Florida, May 14-17, 2002, American Association for Artificial Intelligence.
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