The Western worldview: meaningfulness, self-understanding and understanding the Aymara-other.

Summarizing conclusion

The overall goal of the thesis was to show how our self-understanding and the understanding of the other is determined by societal discourses, which are inspiring to us. Of course, many other contextual factors play a role in self-understanding and understanding the other, but we deliberately choose to emphasize mainly the discursive aspect, acknowledging nevertheless the significance of this contextual embedding of people. While taking this discursive road we opted moreover for a very broad perspective, starting with the broadest delineation possible; the world encounters different cultures have. We defined these world encounters as the interplay of world-intuitions, worldviews, cosmopraxis and materialisations.

World-intuitions stand for the experience of being touched by the existence of the human being, and the experience of being touched by the existence of the world. These intuitions can be conceptually articulated but also filtered or distorted by the movements of discourses within worldviews, and by the manner in which they are further sedimented in structures and institutions. They can also be expressed and re-enacted by a cosmopraxis. We called the clear conceptual expressions of these intuitions hyper goods; the clear expression however is not a guarantee for explicit comprehension. Examples of hyper goods as understood and developed in the Western world are the affirmation of family life, the reduction of pain and suffering and the like. Hyper ideas are distortions, discourses leading people away from these experiences, such as the discourse that people are egocentric. Hyper goods make truth claims and justice claims; hyper ideas can have this function but they do not necessarily have to do so. Hypo goods are the goods that have been filtered, or wrongly understood. We think the significance of the experience of being touched by the world has undergone this fate. The specific articulations, ways of filtering and distortions influence our self-understanding in the world, in the sense that they provide inspirations for the questions ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Where do I go to’, or differently stated, they subtly inspire us by conceptually opening up certain paths for people while walking through their lives, and close or obstruct others. Again differently expressed; within this particular setting some options become meaningful while others cannot be it. The specific articulations, filters and distortions also inspire us in how to understand the non familiar other, and the way he is walking through life.

In part one of the thesis we discussed how both the experiences are articulated, in the Western worldview, in two separate chapters. Both articulations can be divided only in theory, since both articulations influence each other. In order to describe how the experience of being touched by the existence of man is expressed, we first provided a general oversight of the coming into being of some notion with regard to self-understanding, while secondly extending it to our perception of the notion of ‘nation’ and thirdly to our living together in this nation. In the first point we illustrated that the experience of being touched by man was very ramified articulated, in notions such as human dignity, autonomy, affirmation of ordinary life, reduction of pain and suffering. We showed how these notions became crystallised through history, the concept of inner depth and self-expression playing a central role. We likewise specified however, how through history some other notions developed and came to have significance, such as hedonism, or the strong discourse of man actually ‘being’ a homo economicus. It resulted unwittingly in a distorted version of how to perceive man, expressed in terms such as a self-realisation first stance, and a personal-interest-first stance. Moreover did the crystallisation filter the acknowledgement of people being susceptible to a collectively formed set of beliefs.

Second, how to perceive a nation state is very much linked to the way we perceive man. We extended on two extreme, and therefore inexistent versions; the liberal and the
romantic way of living together. In its extreme form the liberal perception of man is a free being, who chooses on a daily basis to live together. The Romantic stance emphasises the significance of being embedded in culture. People receive identity by way of culture, nature functioning as an important symbol of the nation. Whereas the first vision can distort the perception of the human being in the direction of pure freedom, a self that is not bound to any attachment, making free, disengaged choices, the second can result in selective linkedness, according to which some humans are more important than others.

A third way for the experience of being touched by the existence of man to branch out is in the form of an answer to the question ‘How to live together in a nation?’ Many possible political and economic answers can be provided. In this thesis we only emphasised the stances regarding moral backgrounds. For some, such as the extreme liberals, there is no shared good; people have their own preferences which need to count up. Others, such as the communitarians and moderate liberalists, show the distortions the discourse of the extreme liberalists provide. They point to morality becoming procedural, while at the same time pointing to the existing common good on which even liberalism is based. For them, morality resides in a particular culture, not just in the individual’s will. Goods can be weighted out against each other, because that is what people do all the time. We just need another ‘method’ to grasp them. In a final remark we emphasized that both discursive crystallisations are well-intended, in order to get a peaceful coexistence, but we became aware of the fact that this does not suffice. There is no easily solution to this discursive problem, since to a certain extent all discourses inherently and in an uncontrolled way filter or distort. We are not blind either for power-relations often overruling such discourses. Yet, notwithstanding this lack of control on the effect of discourses, walking in a ‘just’ way might be stimulated when staying close, or when returning to this very experience of being touched by man and the world, and reflecting on how to interpret it.

The experience of being touched by the existence of the world; the second intuition, was worked out in a second chapter. Here we maintained that expressing this experience never worked out well, for multiple reasons. We discussed three of them. Firstly, we stated that some of the articulations of the experience of being touched by the world became incorporated into a strongly branched discourse expressing the first intuition, sustaining the idea of an inner self, having shed off the allusion to the second intuition in a second stage. The link today with the second intuition has gone. Secondly, we thought there to be an uneven allocation of significance between the discourses expressing the first intuition and those expression the second; the second intuition being expressed in artistic writing or by the ecological movement. The artistic expression is considered as dead end side-alleys, whereas the expressions of the first intuition are supposed to have a steering function for societal and individual walking. Due to this evolution, the very sensing of the experience of being touched by the world itself tends also to diminish. We deemed this unbalanced allocation to be a key problem, for we believe that our ethical potential gets stimulated by the experience of being touched by the existence of the world. Thirdly, the second intuition has been filtered by the disenchantment process, for which the natural world shrivelled to tangible proportions. Different elements were involved in this process, three of which we will consider here. Firstly, scientific viewpoints on our conceptual representation of nature played an important role. It led to a mechanist-objectivist vision that since quite some time has been abandoned in fundamental science, but that still predominantly reigns in applied sciences such as medicine or technology. In an altered manner and combined with efficacy it found its way in management, and became omnipresent in society now. Next, philosophical perspectives demystified our perception of the notion of ‘land’, for which the earth became conceived as ‘inert material’. The disenchantment process was partly uncontrolled, but partly intended, in that science saw it as its goal to free people of what was called ‘superstition’. In suppressing this specific articulation, the whole experience of being touched by the experience of the world, risks to be suppressed. Lastly, a loss of appeal results in a loss of meaningfulness, since manipulation makes the world foreseeable, and the more foreseeable an experience, i.e. the more controlled, the less meaningful it will be. We did not mention it at this point, but it should be clear here that in saying that the experience of being touched by the world got distorted and purposely suppressed, we in fact already referred to the surpassing element in it.
We assumed in this first part that the distortions and the filterings of both articulations, and the fact that the second has been overshadowed by the first, were partly responsible for problems on the individual, social and ecological level. This has been only part of our postulation, for we also presuppose that if these discourses get closer again to the very experience of being touched, and if both the intuitions get better comprehended (instead of mainly the first one), that this might be one of the many fruitful steps possible in countering components of these interrelated problems. Of course we are aware that, since the effects of discourses are by their nature not controllable, the larger outcome will inherently remain a question mark. This knowledge should however not prevent us from acting.

In the second part we tried to articulate an important element of the experience of being touched by the world and man. For in analysing the material more in depth, we realised that what had been ignored in society was the notion of the surpassing element. In the Western secularized world, it is to some point understood that people have a kind of dignity meriting respect and by which we can be touched. It is far less understood, or in any case taking into account, that we can be touched by the world. What has been totally ignored however is the surpassing element, for the secularised world is assumed to be knowable and graspable. The surpassing element is only visible in art and in religion; in the latter case it turned into a Gods-concept. The surpassing element has not been systematically outlined, for in case it was recognized, it was assumed that nothing could be said about it. Part 2 tries to retrieve this element, it different shapes, the various ways to experience it, its link with meaningfulness, a broader self-understanding and ethics.

In a first chapter (chapter 3) we explained the possible degrees of linkedness a person can have with the world and man. We described no relation, a limited, an advantageous, a shallow, a broadened, and a broadened and deepened relationship. Many more sub-degrees could have been made, or we could have opted to leave some out. The degrees are only one way to show that gradations are possible, going from on the one hand an implicit or explicit egocentric and instrumental stance directed towards ‘obtaining and taking’, towards a stance in which a person ‘exceeds itself’, on the other hand, in order to be able to disinterested ‘receive and offer’. Note that in this scheme an instrumental or egocentric stance is not by definition judged as negative, since perceived as natural part of life. What matters is the extent to which this stance occurs. If an instrumental or egocentric stance is the only way to communicate with the world, then it can become an enduring stance. We call it a single layered linkedness. Therefore experiencing the whole range of degrees is at least recommendable.

The fourth chapter has described a degree of being situated in man and the world. Being situated in was on the one hand expressed by being situated in the social, cultural and historical horizon, as an expression of the experience of being touched by man. Although also here all kinds of degrees are imaginable, we only considered three: non/limited, broadened and deepened situated in. Broadened being linked was defined as being situated in a horizontal way, not necessary being limited to one culture. One can feel having multiple nationalities, feeling allied to many groups and developing a broader identity. People can become consciously aware of this broad scope which, we believe, will inherently encourage the potential commitment to the social world as a whole. The broadened and deepened situatedness in the social world entails being aware of the horizontal and vertical dimension of this horizon. People experience a change in time-dimension, the past taking on meaning and depth, in which they can comprehend themselves fully as part of a chain of life and death. Key to this experience is the conceptual uncovering of the surpassing level. While discovering, one is touched by the surpassing element. We called it a reflective surpassing element, since one is first reflecting on it, prior to experiencing.

Being situated is on the other hand expressed by the natural horizon, as an articulation of the experience of being touched by the world. It is again divided into three degrees. In retrospect we think the broadened degree need still somewhat more underpinning, for we only mentioned that it can be experienced by way of direct sensorial contact, on which can be reflected afterwards. The broadened and deepened degree focuses on the immediate experience of being touched by the surpassing element of nature. We called it an experience of being touched by the non-reflective surpassing element. Making the distinction between the horizons was a means to make a distinction between the surpassing elements. In general we
introduced the degrees in order to indicate that people can on the one side of the spectrum perceive the world as tangible and knowable, while taking a distanced stance to it. On the other hand, they can come to include the intangible part of it, leading to a perceptive and reflective stance.

Chapter five reflected about the matter of being orientated towards man, expressed as being orientated towards the ethical horizon. We deliberately choose to not include the world/nature here, for we think literally receiving orientation by nature – finding guidance in it- is so deeply considered irrational in our society, that it risks obtruding the notion of being situated in it as well. We considered three degrees, 1. no recognition of the ethical horizon, since the normative is in the will, to 2. recognizing this horizon on the social level, in the sense of something meriting respect. A third step illustrated how from there recognition for growth is possible. In retrospect the three logical steps here should have been from not recognizing a surpassing level, to recognizing the reflective surpassing level as the ethical social horizon, the hypergoods by which we are inspired and guided, to recognition of the non-reflective surpassing level, such as meticulously articulated by Levinas. We did not realise we had to take this step while writing this part, for we considered this horizon to be an illustration of the reflective surpassing level, in line with Taylor, but differently expressed by him.

In a sixth chapter we embarked on relating the surpassing element with meaningfulness and self-understanding. In order to do so we first delineate this concept meaningfulness, by means of the insight of Bums and Dedijn. These authors’ goal is to describe the difference between a meaningful interest, a cognitive interest and a manipulative interest. In using their delineations, we aimed at illustrating that a main difference between both is that in case of meaningfulness, the surpassing plays a more central role. In a second point we made a subdivision between on the one hand a narrow-based self-understanding and meaningfulness, and on the other hand a broader-based self-understanding and meaningfulness. In the first case we indicate how a single-layered linkedness, situatedness and orientatedness, as a result of a limited capacity or possibility to self-transcendence, leads to a narrow-based self-understanding and a limited meaningfulness. In the second case we introduced a new element. We illustrated on the basis of a personal account that the surpassing element, up to now considered as resulting in joyful feelings, can very well touch us in a strikingly way, leaving sorrow, anger and grief behind. It resulted in the following scheme: a multi-layered linkedness, situatedness and orientatedness, as a result of an enhanced capacity or possibility to self-transcendence, leads to a broad-based self, but not necessarily to a fuller meaningfulness. Whether or not the outcome is a fuller meaningfulness will depend on whether the resulting feelings are joyful, or whether they lead to grief and sorrow, which one necessary has to transcend as it were, in order to be able to continue living. In general the gradations can be perceived as the gradations regarding the perception of being a human being, and the relation to meaningfulness. A narrow-based self can be believed to be the right way to understand oneself and to act, or a person can comprehend, even semi-implicitly, that a broader-based self is the overall attitude towards life. As for meaningfulness, we can see ourselves as the cause of it or we can perceive meaningfulness as the result of an interaction between the broader-based self and the broader reality.

Next in this chapter we delineated the broader self and partly also the fuller experienced meaningfulness, by comparing it to other delineations about self and meaningfulness, which we divided in five points. First, we made a difference between an existential senselessness and a loss of meaningfulness. The distinction is rather theoretical, since people will not actually feel this distinction on the practical level. Yet we think the response to both experiences to differ. In the case of existential senselessness, to incite a change, an external force will be required, because the people involved are lacking in insight and reflective capacity, in that they are not familiar with a fuller experienced meaningfulness. An existential loss of meaning on the other hand, as the result of calamities, while already having experienced a fuller meaningfulness will very probably bring along serious doubts, but we expect, and have witnessed, that after a while the people involved will succeed in taking up their lives again, in a way ‘closer’ to themselves.
Secondly, we looked at the discussion between the communitarians and the liberals about the self. Kymlicka stated that the real point of difference between the two was whether we can detach ourselves from our goals (values), and hence look at them objectively. Burms provided a clarifying answer, we believe unwittingly, while arguing against the tendency of the egocentric person to hold that he can take an entire distance from himself to neutrally discern who he is and what he is worth. Burms is able to illustrate that this is a fiction. Bringing this into relation with a broadened-based self, we believe from the perspective of a broader-based self-understanding these questions are indeed considered irrelevant: people are just not all too much preoccupied with knowing who they are.

A third point goes in the same direction, for again, we take up the issue that people with a narrow-based self-understanding tend to be quite worried about who they ‘really’ are, leading in the direction of egocentricity. A broader-based self-understanding however is not without affirmation, but it is built on another kind of affirmation. We labelled it a sustained self-affirmation. In order to clarify what we meant we linked it to the notion of implicit or indirect affirmation as discussed by Burms; a genuine invitation to be as an essential by-product. In a last point we demonstrated that a broader-based self should not be confused with coinciding with ourselves, for we hold that Levinas’ vision on it seems closer to a central human experience which we follow: we are always a stranger to ourselves, which explains our incapability to fully understand our dark sides.

Chapter seven finally relates a broader-based self and a fuller experience of meaningfulness to commitment. We in fact steadily have been referring to it in the previous chapters, indicating how the very experience, or reflection on the experience in a sense ‘naturally’ ended up in an ‘inter-ethics’. In this chapter we repeat and more systematically discuss the notion of care, by linking it first to the more general field of discourses of the last 10 years, clarifying and delineation in this way how we understand the relation of the surpassing and ethics. We maintain that the experience of being touched by the non-reflective and reflective surpassing element of man and the world (by the social, cultural and historical horizon, the natural horizon and the ethical horizon), and resulting in a joyful sensation, will result in a momentary sensation of being upheld and indirectly affirmed, which produces a fuller meaningfulness. People will try to uphold this ‘feeling good’, by making evaluations, deliberations and by taking decisions maintaining or reinforcing this multi-layered linkedness, situatedness in, or orientatedness towards the world. As a whole we could say that it will result in stimulating our potential for ethics. Phenomenologically we see here a relation with an enhanced will to take care of the world and man, for they have received more meaning and consequently became nearer and dearer to us. On the other hand will it increase our eagerness to live, since indirect affirmation leads to unbridled vitality, and a larger sense of coherence. As indicated, even if calamities enter unexpectedly in our lives, they will very probably lead to an existential loss of meaning, not to existential senselessness.

If saying that people will ‘care’ more for life, we entered a new area, for the concept of care has been well reflected on philosophically and psychologically. We provided a state of the art, while shortly discussing the paradigm shift from care as obligation, to care as a choice, the ethics of care, while considering some definition of care, as provided by Noddings. On the basis of the latter we delineated our description of care. We labelled it ‘a natural inclination to care’, based on Noddings definition of ‘natural caring’. We again pointed to the fact that this inclination can be filtered by discourses, for outlining the phenomenological steps, at least, as we perceived them, is no guarantee for changed behaviour.

To be clear on this point, by no means do we contend that people should take responsibility or that they should care. We only aim to unravel and extend the underlying conceptual layer, the level of consideration, and to make it public again, because we believe that a thorough understanding of this level might influence the way people make their decisions. Today’s discourses on self-understanding unwittingly legitimise a view of the self as largely based on a combination of a homo economicus type of theory and an ethics of limitlessness in which egocentricity, efficiency, time and financial gain are the main standards for human evolving and in which the liberating and ethical-emancipatory pillar of the Enlightenment seems to have crumbled down. Certainly, we do not believe that all people perceive themselves that way. We only want to point out the fact that modern discourses and societal structures persuade us to take that direction, influencing us on a semi-conscious level.
If we succeed in bringing back the significance of the surpassing element into the picture, this will not automatically yield positive results but it will at least increase the chances of people’s behaviour changing for the better because their decision-making will be better informed and more inspired. What we try to achieve is to reduce the risk of instrumentalism and egocentrism being ranked first in the hierarchy. In other words, we seek to offer an alternative to today’s wide range of conceptual messages largely inciting us to focus on our own interests, by enlarging the scope of options available to people prior to making their choices. They can now also include the significance of fellow-citizens and the relation with the world as relevant factors for their evolution as human selves. We therefore make a modest start on linking the surpassing element again to that from which it has been de-linked - society (ethics and community) and nature - in order for people to explicitly acknowledge its meaningfulness. In re-introducing the surpassing element to these horizons, by pointing out that we are or can be touched through reflection, our aim was ultimately to show how these experiences may naturally engender commitment and involvement.

Obviously, people may still choose to put their own interests first - which in itself is not a negative thing - but we believe that the additional conceptual perspectives will tend to make this less likely. Now that the widened spectrum offers them a more comprehensive view of self-understanding, their basic attitude will very probably change as well.

We are inclined to feel optimistic about this evolution because we think - and the school project by Depuydt and her colleague Deboutte amply illustrate - that, even if the egocentric stance has been appealing as a discourse today, it is no more than a hyper idea, an opinion people unreflectingly repeat because they have heard it so much. It is not what people really think, once they are stimulated to reflect on it. We also believe that a lot of people will recognise what we write because it comes much closer to some of their experiences which they could not place before, embedded as they are in a discourse which neglects the supreme value of the surpassing element, or because of the filters indicated above. In providing a neutral language, we might have enabled these experiences to be cognitively retrieved and serve their role as ethical 'stimulators'. Which choices people effectively take in practical situations will depend on a whole array of matters but we think it a positive development that people will very probably deliberate differently, even if the outcome is not always directly visible yet.

We closed the seventh chapter by delineation the surpassing element. We had already done so earlier in the thesis, but we will summarize both together here. The notion of the surpassing element can semantically mean two things. It can refer to the unknowable and ungraspable, or to a semi-retrievable matter. We expressed it as two levels of the surpassing; the level of the non-reflective surpassing element, and the level of the reflective one. In case of the unknowable and ungraspable, we first are being touched, and then reflect on it, for which it also is non-historical and non-cultural. It is an immediate experience of proximity. We can experience the surpassing that is, we can be touched by something beautiful, by the pain of someone else, or by our own pain. It will create respectively feelings of joy, compassion or grief. These feelings are closely linked to our ethical potential. Joy results in an indirect effect on our ethical potential. We first will feel sustained and affirmed by a sense of belonging to this world, which stimulates our ethical potential, making commitment possible. For what we care, we will more easily take care. Being touched by the pain of others, such as meticulously described by Levinas, results in engendering our ethical potential. It has an immediate, direct effect.

In case of the reflective level of the surpassing, the surpassing is semi-retrievable. If explicitly reflected on, and in that way retrieved, it results in a joyful feeling. We later in this thesis added another division, for we added an implicit level to the reflective surpassing level. We can be touched by the hyper goods in an implicit way, but we can also be compelled by hyper ideas such as the consumerism. With this later division we wanted to express that the gap between proximity and presence can be very small, for the surpassing element, such as consumerism, can be well expressed.

For the third part we had to take a step back as it were, to start again at the point of understanding that a worldview filters, distorts or articulates these experiences of being touched by the non-reflective, non-historical and non-cultural surpassing element in man and the world. We said it does influence our self-understanding and understanding of the world,
but it also influences the way we comprehend to non-familiar other and their experience of the
world. In order to assess in what way the articulations of the world-intuitions distorted the
vision on the Aymara Indian people we implemented the axes of the philosopher Todorov, i.e.
the axiological axis, the praxeological axis and the epistemic axis. The axiological axis
describes value judgements, ranging from inferior to equal. The praxeological axis describes
the level of European behaviour in relation to the Amerindian societies, ranging from
identification to neutrality or assimilation of this alterity into the own worldview. The
epistemic axis concerns the question to what extent Europeans were capable of really
knowing the other peoples. The three axes are interrelated but cannot be reduced to one
another.

Todorov focused on the 15th and 16th centuries, a period for which the axiological axis
centres on the original values of inferior versus equal. In our age, this conceptual axis has
been modified. With the rise of cultural relativism, the notion of inferior has ceased to be. The
only choice left is to perceive the other as equal in his being different. In the second chapter of
part three, we illustrate this being different by considering the situation of the Aymara people,
more precisely the Western views of their alterity. Our conclusion is that key to a full
understanding is multi-vocality. Multi-vocality means that, rather than regarding the Aymara
as a homogeneous group, we recognise the diversity caused by the dynamics of their culture.
It is no easy thing to accept the full implications of this diversity and mutual equality. The
third chapter of this part of the thesis illustrates how, for instance, in Western society
philosophy continues to be referred to as ‘universal philosophy’, whereas other philosophies
are seen as embedded in their respective contexts or as worldviews and cosmologies. Cultural
relativism inherently confronts people with their own truth claims, which they usually take to
have universal value, finding it difficult to relativise them. Another less desirable side-effect
of cultural relativism is that it may easily lead to the notion of incommensurability of cultures.
We indicate that we find both aspects unfruitful and reflect on some ways to overcome them.
The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor makes a bold solution because he re-introduces
universals and the notion of progress in values into an intercultural setting. However, his
examples leave some Eurocentric stains on the intercultural window, which we try to wipe off
by re-implementing his argumentative method but using different examples, examples
referring to Western issues. We brought back into the picture the world-intuitions, for we also
demonstrated that Taylor overly stresses the first intuition while the second gets
overshadowed.