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**UNIVERSALISM VERSUS NIHILISM:
IN THE ABSENCE OF A UNIVERSALIST NARRATIVE
— IS A NEW VIRTUE ETHICS POSSIBLE?**

ABSTRACT

Both nihilism and universalism are historical products of Western speculative philosophy. The failure of this philosophy to discover universally valid laws resulted in widespread despair, which at times created a suicidal atmosphere. The other worldly promises offered by dualistic world models made an escape into an alternate world attractive. This paper investigates whether Nietzsche's proposal to rekindle the fire of life by recovering the Dionysian spirit in creative work is a feasible alternative to nihilistic despair. It goes on to investigate whether a new sense of community and collaborative ethics can be distilled from a renewed engagement with nature. Recent scientific discoveries and experiential evidence could lead to a reformulation of virtue ethics based on naturalistic sources.

Key words: Charles Darwin; Dionysian; Friedrich Nietzsche; Theodore W Adorno; Walter Benjamin; Jürgen Habermas; avant-garde; Jerzy Grotowski; Living Theater; universalism; nihilism; virtue ethics; naturalism; community; collective orchestration; cooperation; selfish gene; communication theory; transcendental communication; meditation; mysticism; dialectic; compassion; logic.

**BOTH UNIVERSALISM AND NIHILISM ARE CREATIONS
OF THE WESTERN MIND**

On a value scale, nihilism and universalism would be placed on opposite ends. The nihilist on the one extreme believes in the basic meaninglessness of life and the universe. The Latin word *nihil* means nothing; nothing makes sense. Philosophers would be quick to assert that in reality there are few complete nihilists, since the deep belief in the meaningless of life and everything it entails, would swiftly suggest that the only solution is ending one's life. Thus most people, who consider themselves nihilist, are only partially nihilistic. For

them, most activities of daily life, such as eating, drinking, having sex, are exempt. When we consider the philosophical use of the term, nihilism is founded on the strict rejection of universalistic values and laws.

A classical universalist in contrast believes that all of life, indeed the whole universe is permeated and controlled by eternal, immutable laws and structures, which can give guidance to the careful observer. Ultimately these immutable laws are believed to be the handwriting of a supreme being, which in turn provides structure and meaning for one's life. It must be noted right at the beginning of this discussion that both worldviews, universalism and nihilism, are products of Western speculative philosophy, and as such, seen from a global perspective, they are relatively rare. The vast majority of people in this world do not scan the universe for absolute laws, and only a scarce few, namely those who have given up this search in utter disappointment would ultimately dare such an enormous move and call the whole universe meaningless.¹ For primal² people, and for members of virtually all non-Western traditions, the whole world is inhabited by spirits or godlike entities. If you stay on their good side, they are willing to help you and provide positive guidance. There is a unity for those animistic people, between the material things of this world and the spirit souls inhabiting them. For a great many people today, in Asia, India, Africa, and many other places in the world this is still true, and their daily existence is surrounded by the spirit world.

Western Civilization alone, beginning with the Greek classical philosophers, has made a different choice. In Greek culture we would have to go back to pre-Homeric times to find the kind of situation I call primal, when human beings lived in harmony with the natural world and freely communicated with gods, spirits, and animals. I have elsewhere described in depth why I believe this so-called Golden Age of the Greeks came to an abrupt end.³ Bemoaning the loss of the Golden Age, the Greek philosophers set out to discover the universal principles that governed the universe. Knowing and following these would make life whole and harmonious once more, so they believed, and they analyzed and defined the permanent nature of an obviously impermanent world.

THE SEARCH FOR PERMANENCE BEGAN WITH THE GREEK PHILOSOPHERS

In this search for permanence and universal validity Plato discovered the world of eternal forms, which was located in a completely separate realm, the world of ideas, while Aristotle established a shadow world of eternal forms

¹ This issue may even contain a gender component, considering that a majority of those who call themselves nihilist are of the male gender. (Note: This conclusion is not based on a scientific research.)

² I take this to mean people who have not been influenced by Western Civilization.

³ See my books *Compassion* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002) and *Compassionate Thinking* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall & Hunt, 2006) for an in depth discussion of this topic.

within things, which he called universals. Contrary to Plato's forms, Aristotelian universals were not located outside of this world, but they were believed to be inherent part of each object, its final purpose or *telos*. While each object in the present world is imperfect, everything can find perfection and completion by reaching its *telos*, or end, which the creator had placed within it. In this Aristotelian world, everything strives to reach its perfect end, which like an attractor was seen as the final cause of change, its *entelechia*.

The idea of a purpose driven world, that was guided by the perfection of the underlying universals, essentially survived more than two thousand years of Western philosophizing. Supported by the dogmatic arrogance of the Christian faith, classical universalism was carried around the globe as part of the imperialist mission of Western societies. When it was finally replaced by a radically new approach, which was developed by Charles Darwin in the nineteenth century, expansionist thinking in the name of universalism had done considerable damage and left a wave of mistrust in its wake. In regard to biology at least, the universalist story began to unravel. During the height of the nineteenth century, the Darwinian theory of evolution introduced a whole new concept of randomness into the world of living things. Instead of the guiding hand of a divine plan or the iron claws of an eternal set of laws, the world of life, according to Darwin, was governed by blind chance and ruthless selection of the fittest. Lacking the kind of objective fervor of the old universalism the new theory of evolution was a different type of law. Nevertheless, relentless competition and struggle for survival of the fittest became the new universals.

Already during the course of the eighteenth century, under the influence of Kant's critiques, philosophy by and large had relinquished the universal claim of objectivity. After Kant's brave assertion that the thing itself, in its universal purity, could never be known, the once influential role of Platonic forms and Aristotelian essentialist universalism seemed to have finally run its course. With Newton, the claim to universality shifted from philosophy to science. Newtonian science seemed to have inherited the universalistic claim of objectivity from philosophy, replacing God's eternal law by the eternal laws of nature. This claim of scientific universality lasted well into the twentieth century when discoveries in the theory of relativity, quantum mechanics, and the theory of chaos rapidly challenged and ultimately replaced the objectivity that had ruled classical science.

Suddenly there seemed to be little demand any longer for universal laws and final causes. For the biological sciences Darwin had closed the scientific gap by replacing teleology with the new theory of evolution. In physics the theory of relativity put in question the very objectivity of time and space. Quantum theory challenged the assumption of an objective world altogether by placing the subjective observer as an active element into the center of the observed world, and simultaneously by challenging the very objectivity of the smallest building blocks of the material world, calling those smallest particles alternately waves,

energy packets, occasions for experience or string-like vibrating events, and at times even nothing tangible at all. Chaos theory finally destroyed forever the prospect of classical predictability by pointing out that all natural systems by virtue of following non-linear dynamical laws are inherently unpredictable, and subject to statistical analysis at best. Gone was the trust of Aristotle in a contradiction free and logical universe and Newton's faith in the predictive power of eternal and universally valid laws.

NIHILISM WAS THE RESPONSE TO THE LOSS OF UNIVERSAL VALUES

Kant's critiques thus on one hand had sealed the fate of ontological universalism, and anyone who thinks otherwise would have to undertake the daunting job to work through and repudiate Kant's argument. Scientific universalism on the other hand became the victim of some major discoveries at the center of modern science. The impact all this had on moral self-understanding and ethics is tremendous. The Greek philosophers had established the idea to develop more adequate ethical norms by a more careful and closer reading of the very laws inherent in the natural world. This quest was continued vigorously by Christian medieval and scholastic philosophers mainly by Thomas Aquinas, whose so-called natural law theory is still followed by the conservative hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Now those very laws were in question, and with them the foundation for a naturally based morality was in danger of collapsing, giving way to widespread moral relativism that ultimately lead to a nihilistic worldview.

But Kant himself was not at all ready to give up a way to establish a binding moral code and solicit the Absolute. If universal laws could not be fully established, what if the divine could be made visible through universally good acts? God would show himself, Kant reasoned, but only to those who engage in virtuous acts. The debate over the validity of Kant's categorical imperative and his claim to universal goodness never completely resolved. It remained, however, logically indisputable that ontological analysis could not produce universal guidelines or essential laws as Aristotle had predicted. While still today a number of cognitive and analytical philosophers believe that a universal ethics could be deducted logically, many others have concluded that neither nature nor logic could be valid sources for ethics. The pragmatic solution, "good is what works" on the other hand easily leads to an instrumental ethics that justifies expediency over goodness.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century Newtonian science with its web of eternal laws of nature continued to exact a stabilizing influence on the mood of the intellectuals of the time and even on average people. For a while it seemed as if science could stem the tide of a relativistic and nihilistic worldview. Influenced by Isaac Newton and Rene Descartes, science had taken over from philosophy the task of establishing universal laws in an ever changing world.

A universe governed by eternal laws appeared to be quite comforting and stable, and not so different from an Aristotelian world, even when it became apparent that this clockwork universe was presided over by an uninvolved watchmaker god. But in the course of the nineteenth century, once the effect of the Second Law of Thermodynamics with its promise of a slow but sure death of the universe became known and popularized, the seeming inevitability of the Law had a disastrous effect on intellectuals and the masses alike and caused widespread pessimism that was to last deep into the twentieth century. Not only had human beings lost their central position in a divine scheme of creation, the universe itself appeared to be purposeless and driving toward inevitable self destruction. This utterly pessimistic worldview was further nourished by the rampant poverty and widespread unemployment in the wake of the industrial revolution. In literature, the exemplary nobility, which was central to the hero of the classical age, was replaced by antiheroes and lowlife characters. Rather than celebrating nobility and greatness the new realism brought baseness, immorality, and negativity center stage.

Universalism and especially any chance for a universalist ethics, a moral code that would absolutely bind all human beings, had failed to materialize. For some a desperate escape into hopelessness was the obvious answer. A nihilistic attitude, fed by the deistic world view of a thoroughly mechanistic science, spread among intellectuals and took hold of the masses.

LIGHTING THE DIONYSIAN FIRE IS A WAY OUT OF NIHILISM—BUT BEWARE OF THE PRICE

As the astute German philosopher and relentless critic of his time Friedrich Nietzsche saw it, his contemporaries were engulfed in unbounded mediocrity. Following their base instinct, the herd mentality of the people had spread to every corner of society. Uncritically they followed the authoritarian demands of a meaningless and power hungry church, which promised cheap other worldly rewards, while offering nothing to relief the masses from their self induced servitude and lead them into true enlightenment. Should the human being be the only animal that does not go beyond himself, Nietzsche cried out and demanded evolutionary change even though he had little hope that his countrymen would follow. Deeply distrusting universal solutions, Nietzsche put emphasis on the power and empowerment of the individual. With his return to the Dionysian, Nietzsche countered Kant's attempt to discover God through moral acts, which, given the moral decay and slave mentality of his time, he saw as an impossibility. Courageously Nietzsche replaced rational universality with a daring jump into creativity and aesthetic salvation. While "getting out of hell" was the artistic person's first call, the Nietzschean hero secretly hoped that in the creative act the divine would reveal itself to the inspired and put him on fire. Nietzsche's aesthetic solution of creative immediacy led to a whole new philosophical and

more recently also scientific search that inspired numerous art movements, creative writers, intentional communities, and even challenged some highly trained philosophers and psychologists.

Carefully arranged experiments and controlled scientific research seemed to indicate that the Dionysian fire that is found in the immediacy of artistic engagement can produce an array of unexpected benefits.⁴ At times Dionysian immediacy seems to have the power to connect the individual with the existential ground of being, but its flipside can be a frightening experience of gaping nothingness, the terrifying realization that the sacred hub is empty. This dialectic of immediacy was well known and explored by many twentieth century writers such as Thomas Mann. In his novella *Death in Venice*, Mann meticulously analyzed and tested the frightening proximity of good and evil, which can be experienced simultaneously in the moment of uncontrolled desire. Raw immediacy contains the sacred and evil side by side.

Worse yet, when the Dionysian fire gets hold of the masses, the results can be even more disastrous. The momentarily irrational mass movements of fascism and Stalinism that accentuate the bloody history of the twentieth century, amply demonstrate this. Already Hegel warned that if the Dionysian element gets hold of the movement of the masses, bacchantic riots would ensue and destroy tranquility and peace and even put the very rationality of civic society in grave danger. The brutality of the two world wars, the reality of the extermination camps and Gulags of the twentieth century are proof for the profoundly evil effects produced by ordinary people when they get swept up in bacchantic riots and participate in unconscionable acts of orchestrated animality and horror.

It is therefore fair to assume that the very danger of the Dionysian, if unbri-dled and uncontrolled, was the reason why early philosophers rejected it in search of an enlightened, more rational path to the divine. This is after all, why and how the story of Western philosophy as a narrative of Western Enlightenment began. Rejecting the dark night of the Dionysian spirit, its uncontrolled rituals and secretive sacrifices, philosophers set out to discover the Apollonian light of reason. One obvious advantage of the Apollonian was its preference for rational communicability. Instead of having to wait for initiation and trusting a guru, Apollonian truth could become the content of rational discourse, the subject matter of public instruction, and the ultimate guarantor of the veracity behind the models of reality, which until today dominate the textbooks of science. In the final analysis, it was the result of the Apollonian and a testament to its lasting power that in a deep sense, after having democratized truth, made the very idea of political democracy possible and helped with achieving it.

⁴ See Mihály Csikszentmihályi *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990)

TWO QUESTIONS

Why not continue on the path to enlightenment, one has the right to ask. As pointed out above, one of the aims of philosophy was the establishment of universal truth, which then was proven by Kant to be an impossible task. But the very quest for universal truth had another more sinister effect, the close alignment of the enlightenment mind with domination, which in its most ardent form resulted in perennial male domination, where for two and a half millennia half of humanity dominated over the other half, while all along arguing that divine reason had willed such undemocratic inequality. One can never forget that for most of its history ideological universalism, far from being an ardent defender of human equality and equal rights, acted as a promoter of hierarchical inequality and domination.

Two questions need to be answered. First, is there any sense and purpose in reclaiming the Dionysian light, if its very nature entails the opening up of channels into the depth of unbridled sensuality and uncontrolled action? Also, could the characteristic loss of conscious awareness and purposeful self-identity, which today is more often connected with illicit drugs than with sacred activities, have any positive value that makes its pursuit desirable? Secondly, is there a way to rescue the idea of universalism as a uniting rather than dividing philosophy, as a philosophy free of domination and ideological baggage, a philosophy that human beings from all walks of life could embrace?

As we try to find answers to both questions we will discover that in some ways they are intricately connected. Kant's critique aimed only at the logical deduction of truth using the Aristotelian tools of syllogism. Kant did not deal with experiential or intuitive truth, which is the essence of the Dionysian world. So if logical deductive truth cannot find and define a new universalism, is there a chance to approach the subject through the Dionysian pathway while simultaneously avoiding the gaping pitfalls of the dark god?

Perhaps a prior question begs an answer: In the current world situation is it indeed desirable and useful to pursue a universalistic philosophy? Given the long history of such philosophies lending themselves to personal and social domination and discrimination, it would hardly surprise that especially voices from formerly oppressed countries, such as China or Africa would ultimately resent a new universalism, which would once again promote what must appear in their eyes as purely Western values. The fact that attempts in formulating universalist values usually come equipped with the very defense that denies particular allegiance to any one nation, frame of thoughts or one particular philosophy or value system does little to counteract the suspicions coming from countries of former European colonization. Such resentment has a long history. When asked to adopt universalist codes such as the charter of Human Rights or a universal code of ethics there is a clear echo of suspicion and even outright rejection, especially from Muslim countries who believe in the inherent superi-

ority of Islamic values. It is quite clear that any future attempt to create a universal ethics would have to include in its formulation the conscious awareness of its origin, historical and otherwise, in order to avoid the appearance of ideological blindness.

But even within the postmodern paradigm that is currently fashionable among Western intellectuals there is a clear rejection of grand narratives. Generally this means a mistrust toward system and worldviews, which in a comprehensive way try to contain answers to all questions. For postmodern scholars the grand narrative worldview has gone out the window. Like biological evolution, social development works incrementally. Small steps are taken in the effort to adapt to changes. In this pragmatic view, small steps and ongoing experimentation are the preferred method, not grand narratives that propose universally accepted laws.

CAN A UNIVERSALIZABLE SET OF VALUES BE RECOVERED?

These cautionary notes aside we will now take a closer look at the possibility of discovering and perhaps reclaiming a universal or universalizable set of values, being well aware that any new universalist proposal would by historical necessity be always somewhat less than absolute. This raises the obvious question whether the very label universalist may not have outlived its usefulness and should be replaced with some more open term.⁵

Regardless of the name I now will turn to analyze the value of experiential truth experiences in regard to the possibility of deriving from these obviously subjective events a universalizable set of rules. Following the Dionysian trail we will quickly arrive at an impasse. Today a remarkable body of research is available for an analytic and critical assessment of experiential truth discovery. At the time of Walter Benjamin, for instance, during the first half of the 20th century, it was still quite impossible to conceive of the present moment and its experience as anything other than the cumulative effect of the future becoming the past. Suggesting otherwise and for instance assuming that in the experience of the present moment could lay a secret access to the divine dwelling in the presence of the material world was enough for Benjamin to be expelled from the brotherhood of Marxist intellectuals of his time. For Benjamin's close friend Adorno metaphysical speculation was clearly anathema as well. Speaking in discursive or speculative language about the Absolute was covered by the old Hebrew law of silence. While in actuality his dialectical aesthetics may offer some practical guidance to mystical recovery of the divine the language of negative dialectic was careful not to express such experience in positive philosophical terms. Though classical Judaic mysticism, formulated in the Kabala,

⁵ The change of the name of the International Society for Universalism to the International Society for Universal Dialogue is a result of this line of argument.

had already been involved in the creation of the Hegelian living dialectic, its real power became only apparent after the Marxian reversal of the dialectic formula.

ADORNO'S NEGATIVE DIALECTIC- DENYING TRUTH?

In dialectical materialism, the material world, far from being dead and mechanical, as the Newtonian worldview described it, comes alive and is endowed with spirit. This powerful dialectic is readily apparent to those engaged in mystical practices or in art. The Absolute, in Adorno's own words, has withdrawn into the micrology of things, where in theory it could be contacted or encountered by the creative mind in aesthetic experience. But even here Adorno was uncommitted, if not directly negative. No wholeness, even in aesthetic experience, seems to be ever legitimate. Whenever such experience of wholeness would occur, the moment it becomes intellectual awareness it is real only as its other, a negation of the event. It would be a question whether Adorno ever allowed himself to experience wholeness in art and take consolation from it. His rejection of jazz music and his embrace of atonality seemed to say otherwise. It appears that this super aesthetic human being did not allow himself the consolation, the healing of the fractured mind, not even in the encounter with creative performance. If he did he refused to dwell in it or describe it.

For the rest of the artistic world of the so-called Avant-garde the quest for an encounter with the incommensurable reality, the divine ground of all things, or simply the attempt to experience an authentic moment became the goal of artistic endeavors. For a number of prominent avant-garde theaters such as the American Living Theater and the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski's world famous Laboratory Theater in Wroclaw, sacred authenticity became the goal of artistic work.

In one famous example the Living Theater practiced a meditative "blow in the stomach" as a way to elicit a mystical encounter. The report of the practitioners expressed the range of possible experiences during such a trip, which was either limited by the complete presence in the Here and Now or the traversing of the mind to unlimited spheres. Further research into Now experiences came from trips induced by drugs such as LSD and Ecstasy, whose hallucinogenic properties had a similar effect on the mind. The scientific consensus today seems to be that the content of all such experiences is completely subjective, depending largely on an individuals' belief system or faith. Even though there are some common threads in all these events, it appears that the content is completely informed by the expectations and history of the practitioner. This leaves any attempt in arriving at a universalistic conclusion more than wanting. Far from entering any Platonic realm of pure forms, which then could be formulated into a new universalist ideology, nothing like that seems to be a possible result of pure and immediate experience, aesthetic or otherwise.

This is not to say that a widespread practice of meditative and aesthetic experience should not be encouraged and practiced. Meditation practices and perhaps even hallucinogenic experiences under careful guidance could well be the source for spiritual renewal and result in a wide spread reconnecting with an otherwise abandoned natural world. Not only should the capacity of such practices to revitalize an ever more disappearing *élan vital* not be underestimated, the effect such practices have to develop certain healing powers of the mind are nothing less than astounding.⁶ Using these techniques as part of the educational process of every child could someday be seen as a public health priority, since probably little else could have more beneficial effect on the collective psyche of the general public. This could ultimately counteract the tendency toward general nihilism in a practical existential rather than an intellectual cognitive fashion.

CAN PRIVATE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES YIELD UNIVERSAL TRUTH?

Before we move on and draw some practical conclusions in regard to the universalistic benefits of private mystical experiences, two important precautionary notes are in place. First let me stress the qualifier *private*. Mystical experiences have a tendency, when practiced in a collective or even in a community to lay the grounds for a new religion or cult. Since as of now no such experiences can be scientifically verified (in the traditional sense of scientific objectivity and general repeatability of the experiment) their efficacy and results can easily be embellished at will and in a mass situation can be manipulated to turn masses of people into subservient followers of a power hungry leader. Nietzsche's overman, presumably someone who can handle a higher realm of spiritual existence and has spirits at his command, should not surround himself with mere followers. This is the reason Zarathustra wanted to collect a group of empowered and self designed individuals, because he is well aware that the masses of disenfranchised people would act as willing, but mindless followers and only be slaves to the cause. At this point in human history we should make practices that could lead to mystical insights available to the general public and encourage their use, but their content, even when practiced in groups, should remain private. Any collective interpretation of the insights gained in such a subjective manner run the risk of mass manipulation and abuse. One only needs to recall events such as the Jonestown mass suicide or similar events where cult leaders using their charismatic powers cloaked in religious garb skillfully manipulated the minds of their flock. Any of the established pre-enlightenment religions would of course face a similar critique.

The call for a strictly private character of insights gained from direct mystical experiences leads to my second precautionary remark. As I said before, as a philosopher Adorno was very careful not to elaborate in philosophical discourse

⁶ See Bill Moyers, *Healing and the Mind* (New York, Doubleday 1993).

on the topic of the Absolute, even as present in the depth of the material world. This is the reason why Adorno almost mercilessly criticized his contemporary and colleague Heidegger. Adorno accused Heidegger of dwelling in the Absolute by describing the moment of identity. This turning of the mystical moment into conceptual and linguistic presence was, according to Adorno, committing idolatry. Adorno believed this new ideology was worthy of deconstruction. The experience of the absolute in aesthetic encounter must, according to Adorno, remain a fleeting one. As soon as it turns into language, it reveals its own falseness, so goes the dialectic of aesthetic presence. To avoid Hegel's much feared bacchantic riots, the unaesthetic and unlimited carnival of the people had to be curtailed and balanced by reflective discourse, just as the cognitive mind had to refrain from formulating the content of mystical insights in a philosophical scheme, much less even than making it the ideological center piece of a new universalistic philosophy.

This leaves any attempt in formulating a new universalism in a defensive position. Perhaps rather than looking for a universalist philosophy in the old fashioned way as a grand narrative system, this new universalism should be more akin to a call for action, a strategy rather than a complete philosophical worldview, since the latter seems neither desirable nor acceptable. I contend that Habermas' theory of communicative practice represents just such a strategy. Instead of locating rationality outside of the communicating subjects in the structures of nature or the cosmos, Habermas places the very rationality in the center of the speech act. With this Habermas assumes that rational conversation is guided by the mutual goal of the speakers to find common ground or truth. Influenced by American pragmatic philosophy, Habermas thus avoids using a traditional truth pattern used by all conventional universalist theories, which the pragmatists called a "copy idea of truth". In the old way truth was a distillation of cosmic structures, which then was compared with the current truth claim and applied accordingly. Pragmatism rejects this kind of truth modeling, of course, in perfect alignment with Kant's critique. In Habermas' model it is assumed that the participants of a speech act refrain from using preformed, ideological models of truth in favor of an openness that allows communicative agreement and truth to develop in the course of a speech.

FROM COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICE TO TRANSCENDENTAL COMMUNICATION

Habermas' communicative praxis theory puts a high demand on the concept of rationality. But, I believe, especially in a cross-cultural and intercultural dialogue the very idea of rationality must be scrutinized. Even within the Western context, rationality as an unquestioned "judge all" has come under fire, especially by a number of feminist theorists. While this paper does not allow the space to develop a full critique of Western rationality it must suffice here to

sketch out some of the problems. Especially when considering intercultural dialogue it is often important to take into account subtle cultural indicators, unspoken customs, and underlying speech currents. These non-verbal aspects of speech can often be of equal importance in achieving the common goal. Someone who is committed to rational dialogue often assumes that a logical explanation of a situation should quickly lead to a common agreement. If this agreement is not reached, it is often too easy to blame the communication partner of being non-rational.

Habermas' communication theory, as much of contemporary Western philosophy especially in the analytical tradition, tacitly assumes that philosophy is the guardian of knowledge, which is to say, philosophy is the guardian of rational discourse. I believe that the older more comprehensive and far reaching job of philosophy is to be the guardian of wisdom. This seemingly small distinction could become of utmost importance when we enter into intercultural dialogue. It also is essential when the goal is to nonverbally communicate with other species and with the universe. A communication model build on wisdom thus goes beyond communication as a solely human activity. Not only does it reach beyond communication that takes place between rational human beings, but must include the possibility of communication with the silent partners who also are members of the world of the Other, with animals and plants and with the rest of the silent universe. Such communication goes beyond rational discourse and includes an aesthetic dimension. Approaching the other with wisdom turns communication into an aesthetic experience. Communicating becomes art.

I have developed such a communication theory in the philosophy I call Transcendental Perspectivism. In my book *Compassion, A New Philosophy of the Other*, I have pointed at the affinity of transcendental communication with art and called it the Philosophy of the Shamans. A philosophy following such a path toward a new universalism will steer away from ethnocentrism and cultural hubris that is even present in the very conception of a universal rationality. It will invite the collective wisdom of all cultures and utilize their rituals and practices in the attempt to gain new and better access to a dialogue with the natural world, not to further exploit it, not to master it, but to live in harmony with it, in order to have the spiritual potential of the universe on our side, rather than seeing the universe as a hostile enemy of chance and chaos. In rare moments of sentimental reflection, Adorno spoke of the possibility of the natural world opening its eye once more and embracing us as its product, a moment in which primal harmony would be restored.

THE RETURN OF THE DIONYSIAN

This brings our search for a new universalism full circle back to the Dionysian. Accepting the dark light of Dionysius opens up the possibility for non-verbal communication and mystical encounters. This will ultimately lead to a

revision of human relationship with the natural world. The current paradigm of Western science that views the natural world in a mechanistic way must be replaced by a new vision of the natural world as inhabited and deeply involved with the evolution of consciousness, mind, and spirit. This view is familiar to a great majority of human beings around the world and is completely consistent with most cultures now and in the past. Only Western science taught differently, following a model of a silent and uninvolved universe in which the development of life is only a freak accident, and we are alone in a vast uncaring universe. In spite of the great technological successes this kind of science has supported, the view of the mechanical universe is simply wrong and contrary to the experience of all people who involve themselves in the dialogue with the Dionysian light. A deep involvement with the Dionysian light of experiential truth could help us open those hidden channels of communication, which were thought to be lost since the loss of the Golden Age and of Paradise. In as far as philosophy can help in this process, it could truly become again what it once was: a guardian of wisdom. Far from depicting the universe as a dead machine, perspectivist experience could ultimately assure us that the whole universe is alive.

Whether we call this view panpsychism, or as I prefer, neo-animism, adopting it will lead to a Renaissance of the human being on earth and a realignment in the natural order. As David Skrbina in *Panpsychism in the West*⁷ pointed out, the scientific adoption of a neo-animist view will solve a number of currently unsolved problems, including the ecological apathy of human beings on earth. Neo-animism will further suggest the conception of the whole universe as a developing, growing and evolving organism, as Rupert Sheldrake in his book *The Presence of the Past* pointed out.⁸ We will learn to understand the universe as an organism, which contains and nurtures within itself myriads of other organisms, and all of these are connected through the web of life. This new conception will allow us to replace the explanation of developing order in the so-called inorganic world, which current science explains with a weak reference to the Law of Thermodynamics, with the much more effective Theory of Evolution and its companion, the law of natural selection. As in the biosphere of living organisms, living systems evolve, by meticulously cooperating with each other, from dimension to dimension. Change is thus not only the result of random mutation, but the result of a natural drive of organisms to cooperate and fit their environment.

⁷ David Skrbina, *Panpsychism in the West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

⁸ Rupert Sheldrake *The Presence of the Past* (Rochester, VE: Park Street Press, 1988).

TOWARD A NEW VIRTUE ETHICS BASED ON SELF-PRESERVATION AND COOPERATION

Organisms have two innate drives, to stay alive and to cooperate with other organisms. In cooperation organisms can achieve tasks that they cannot achieve by themselves. In this sense cooperation is an extension of the will to survive. Each time individuals cooperate they experience the world around them from a higher dimension. This process, which I have called collective orchestration, is at the base of all community creation, even among human beings.⁹

As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁰ there is ample evidence today that the process of collective orchestration occurs at all levels of the organic and so-called inorganic world, advancing lower level systems to higher complexity through cooperation. An analysis of this innate propensity of living systems to build communities and cooperate, could eventually lead us to a new set of ethical principles derived not from God or culture but from the way nature works. A new virtue ethics could be firmly based on such a naturalistic foundation. This new set of rules, based on the principles of cooperation and survival, could lend themselves to a formulation of a new universalizable ethics.

This new ethics will be based on empirical criteria, not universal laws. Like any law in science it would not be absolute but always be open to falsification. Accepting a new sense of community, a communitarian spirit would ensue, replacing the selfish gene paradigm of the past two centuries. While never forgetting the value of each individual, communities would compete with each other to offer each member the very best quality of life. Today it is amply clear that individualistic ethics based on rational criteria alone has failed, while for most people there is no going back to outdated religious norms. Well functioning communities, as we know, are the only real guarantor for the development of an ethical human being. Greek classical wisdom was captured in the insight that communities help individuals to become their best while individuals have an obligation to help their community to thrive and excel. It has long been known that virtue ethics, short of being able to fall back on universal laws, needs a thriving community to support life's meaning. The real victim, we realize, of individualism, industrialization, secularization, and consumerism is a sense of community. Reclaiming the importance of community on the basis of its natural importance may well be the correct and only road to an ethical revival in a globalized world.

⁹ See *Toward a Naturalistic Foundation of Community, How Science can Solve the Spiritual Crisis?* in *The Future of Religion: Toward a Reconciled Society* (Brill: Leiden, 2007) pp. 343–364.

¹⁰ See Krieglstein, *Compassion* (2002), “Rediscovering Community”, pp. 79–85

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