

Jenseits von Gut und Böse (Beyond good and evil)

by Henri J.H. van der Kooij

The Enlightenment philosopher Kant argued that a peace that goes beyond simply the absence of war(s) and leaves all exploitation behind could be achieved by making a straightforward distinction between good and evil, but that man with his «*reine Vernunft*» is still far from such a state of mind.ⁱ That was some two and a half centuries ago, but is still highly topical considering all the sentiments with which societal issues and conflicting interests are usually approached. In this respect, man has made very little progress and is apparently far from 'true' Enlightenment. Especially when one considers that Spinoza made an eloquent appeal to pure reason much earlier during the early Enlightenment.ⁱⁱ The Netherlands the land of the 'radical Enlightenment' (as Jonathan Israel describes itⁱⁱⁱ)? No doubt a cradle, but little more has been done with it than erecting a statue or an occasional commemoration. Dutch citizens as many alike have forgotten their own radical past, or no longer want to be reminded of it. This certainly applies also to the *Patriot era* in the Netherlands as a prelude to the French Revolution.^{iv}

'The good' and 'the bad' are, for all their obsessive preoccupation with current events, cast into a simplified mold to such an extent – and have become so corrupted – that any room for nuance is absent, or is made suspect or impossible. A serious regression with no less serious consequences. Moral courage (*fortitudo* - Spinoza; cf Susan Neiman^v) is therefore far from it. Hypocrisy rules and kills any sense of reason. What seems 'reasonable' or is pretended to be so, on closer inspection often turns out to be opportunism and can change as quickly as the weather. In this way one does not achieve stability, let alone the (world) peace advocated by Kant, which is based on respect for human rights. This *categorical imperative* is therefore wasted on many policymakers. Nevertheless, they imagine themselves superior to such considerations and believe that with '*Real-politik*' good and evil can be modeled on desired schemes. Its realism, however, is minimal, if not completely absent. One wanders and rambles to the beat, despite massive propaganda suggesting otherwise. Should citizens put their trust in this? To ask the question is to answer it.

Societies drop out and everyone goes their own way, which, by the way, is not so bad for such policy officials since it also keeps unwanted solidarity to a comfortable minimum. Thus critical contestation remains within limits and one can continue to imagine oneself 'moral' unhindered. The totalitarian threat is therefore less illusory than it seems. All '*newspeak*' attests to it to an undeniable degree. The adapted vocabulary remains the ideal vehicle to euphemistically mask many applied fallacies ('*nonsense on stilts*' – Bentham^{vi}). Being 'up-to-date' is therefore just as debatable as believing that technocracy is merely an expression of human ingenuity and that all progress can be attributed to it. Such progress turns out to be relative, if not extremely ambivalent. Policy and governance are still far from what could be achieved with consistent respect for human dignity. But then again, that is something for dreamers However, reason rattles on and shows serious signs of meaninglessness and calcification. This does not bode well. Especially for those who want to tackle the new feudalism firmly. After all, that is what Enlightenment thinking was all about: that man would free himself from organized oppressive relationships such as *feudalism*, *colonialism*, *servitude*, *exploitation* and *patronization*. Not only with regard to large landowners, religion and the Church, but not least from authoritarian political relationships. With the established democracy and rule of law, a big step was taken, but as a result of the ongoing erosion of these institutions, we are back to square one in many

respects. Human rights all too often turn out to be a paper tiger; the *Universal Declaration* is on its deathbed because statesmen only selectively think they should take these far from gratuitous recommendations seriously. On the contrary, all member states are obliged to comply fully with the UN's agreed principles and tenets.^{vii}

Institutions that aim to protect the international legal order have become powerless forums where stifling bureaucracy is as rampant as in national state institutions. Little reason, in short, for complacency, but all the more for alertness and activism. Not of the 'sticky' (bigoted) kind, but above all actions that really make a difference and bear witness to a self-awareness that disregards the importance of the adequate application of valuable insights from neither political philosophy nor political economy. 'Modern management' appears to be pitiful compensation for a gross lack of it and should be fiercely opposed. Come to think of it amid all the market(ing) overkill these days.^{viii} Current leaders no longer care about any of this. They consider themselves elevated above all philosophical 'mousy niches' that might even slightly thwart their lofty ambitions. It is therefore time for such figures to disappear from the scene and be replaced by conscientious individuals who do not take liberties with law and order. However, this will not happen by itself but will have to be fought for, just as the feudal structures of the past did not disappear of their own accord. Anyone who nevertheless thinks that modern life would make such issues 'irrelevant' is sorely mistaken.

Cold feet and Hobbes' jungle

Overestimating man and his abilities (as well as underestimating, for that matter) leads to nothing. Hobbes declared this long ago.^{ix} After all, man's fellow man remains a wolf if given the chance. However, such opportunities abound and seem to be increasing in spite of all moral talk. The increasing total *exploitation* of man and habitat is plain to see. However, it cannot be stopped with complaints, but only with targeted *structural* measures. Not of the sentimental kind, but with political-economic policy addressing that does not fear or taboo the *ideological* debate. Because that is sticking one's (political) head in the (marked) sand. Only those willing to consider the financial-economic order *as a whole* will be able to make a meaningful contribution to this effort. Everyone else will be forced to be reduced to being followers as long as they do not open their eyes to this major issue. Consumer power, like democratic power, is relative if the massive plutocratic-oligarchic structures and mechanisms remain unchanged and citizens continue to be systematically relegated to second place. Whoever will be in power and whatever vistas one may want to present. For the political culture has become so corrupted and decayed that little can be expected of it in this respect. Party democracies are more concerned with themselves than with the interests of society and still willingly subscribe to perfidious ideas that do more harm to these interests than they are able to turn disordered matters for the better. The ongoing ridiculous exaltation about such policies is inappropriate and is little more than a lamentable demonstration of short-sightedness and ignorance. Where is the courage to really take matters in hand as it should and could be? The needs are considerable, but the urgency is often lacking. Apparently, politicians prefer to throw around billions of undesignated money rather than use it for sensible matters. The priorities are therefore completely deranged.

Now one certainly does not need to take Hobbes as the ultimate standard in everything to see that the human deficit is not nearly so simple to model into desired attitudes. We have already seen more than enough misery from this kind of attempts. In any case, wanting to 'model' is an extremely debatable and precarious business. Especially in the wrong hands. After all, intrinsic motivation that is firmly rooted is always better than steering for forced adaptation (or conformist 'reflexivity'). Thus, financially placating citizens proves to be as counterproductive

as enticing them into politically-correct compliant behavior. Citizens will always keep a sharp eye on their personal interests and will not accept being made a plaything. However, whether this also serves the common good is questionable if the personal interest is insufficiently linked to the collective benefit. Then what remains - and rules - is merely the selective *partial interest* that benefits only a few. The 'wolf' then has free rein as a jackass. In short, an end must be put to exploitative forces and powers if society is to be spared the undermining consequences of such orientations.

Yes indeed, that is ideology full stop and beyond technocracy. What is wrong with that? Anyone who takes the slightest interest in political-administrative developments cannot ignore the fact that the *supposed* 'de-ideologization' that leads to depoliticization is a fake pacifier that has done societies a lot of harm, because it leaves out the *causal core* of fundamental issues. Many policy-based fallacies have resulted from it. Continuing to circle the issues will result in a soup that is eaten many times hotter than it is served. Bon appetit. Anyone who still wants to make a 'political difference' will have to come to terms with the loss of the scope with which societal interests should be addressed. This means a complete *repositioning* of everything that is currently understood as 'social criticism'. For serious criticism that goes beyond a bit of 'surfacing' is no longer appreciated, especially by the left (or what remains from it), since many have identified themselves completely with business models of the market. Did they really think that with 'gender equality' they were beyond class society and that 'profit models' would make the need for solid social security irrelevant? Wake up! In particular the young who consider themselves fully 'up-to-date' do not realize that things are slipping away from them completely and that the cards are being dealt elsewhere. For many, however, this appeal will prove to be a *bridge too far*. Nonetheless, one cannot escape it and will have to accept the fact that more and more citizens will no longer meekly put up with ambivalent patronization. After all, 'querulantism' has always been at the root of contestation against unbridled exercise of power, and will remain so. All 'revisionism' or cold feet notwithstanding.

The *political culture* is not only bankrupt, but has brought this bankruptcy upon itself and is therefore to blame for its own instability. The 'citizen' may constantly be presented as the villain and scapegoat, but it is really the political organizations themselves that have failed in terms of policy and have irresponsibly pursued chimeras. Not only is the problem-solving capacity pathetic, but the *representativeness* of policies has long been lacking and is steadily eroding. This erosion of the political system has created a vacuum that will prove almost irreparable if one continues along the same path and does not come to one's senses. A 'new social contract' is out of the question under these circumstances. Anyone who still believes that the policy is in the right hands, or can be balanced with a few adjustments, is seriously alienated from reality and can easily join the group of 'confused people'. Inward-looking solipsism has had its day. C'est fini. (You spoke of 'humanity'...?)

Concluding remarks

For all the squabbling over viability and sustainability, there is ultimately only one source of life and that is the sun. That also applies to swampy polder deltas like the Netherlands and other supposed 'autonomous' (i.e. 'strategic independent') and 'well-to-do' societies. So whatever one thinks one can achieve on climatic or other level of environmental issues, without (solar) power it will not work. This is not to say, however, that *solar energy* is the overarching magic word for everything, but mainly that one should not think one can replace this resource with limitless sterility without consequences. Life may take place in a greenhouse, but it is not a laboratory or incubator. It remains a *carnaval des animaux*. Seen this way, it is all the stranger that people

promote animal welfare, but at the same time allow (other) people to face the death of war as if it were an inescapable 'natural phenomenon'. If that is not selective indignation... . 'Animal farm', however, was already completely corrupted a long time ago. And not only in the former Soviet Union. A little more self-reflection would not be out of place for human beings. Anyone who thinks he can wear a halo of superior invulnerability in the *human zoo* should be careful not to be blinded. Paranoia then is on the lurk. In any case, it remains a fierce struggle in the 'corporate jungle of life' on the monkey rock and *a little solace* is hard to find.

Thus the question remains whether one should take Hobbes or Kant as a guide to all that modern societies need. The answer, however, may be clear. Idealism and realism do not have to be antagonistic *ad infinitum* as long as one knows how to value everything that is considered 'pragmatic', to judge it on its merits and to refute its many appearances. That is the *permanent imperative* that accompanies the pair of concepts « Sein und Sollen ».

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— Van der Kooij | ISSR The Netherlands, april 2024 —

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Notes and References

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- ⁱ Kant, I. *Kritik der reine Vernunft*, 1781/1787, Wilhelm Weischedel (Hrsg.), Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1974
— *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 1790/1793, Reprint by Karl-Maria Guth, Berlin 2016
 - ⁱⁱ Spinoza, B. *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 1670 translated by Jonathan Israel and Michael Silverthorne with introduction and notes, the Cambridge Texts in History of Philosophy series, 2007
— *Tractatus Politicus*, 1675-1677, in the second volume of Curler, E. The Collected Works of Spinoza, Princeton University Press 2016
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 - ⁱⁱⁱ Israel, J. *Radical Enlightenment; Philosophy and the making of Modernity 1650-1750*, Oxford University Press, 2002
 - ^{iv} The *Patriots* were 'heavily touched' by the ideas of the Enlightenment and opposed the inert and closed feudal-oligarchic regent clique of the late 18th century in the Dutch Republic and turned against the last stadholder William V and his supporters in particular. They refused to pay taxes any longer, forcibly seized several city governments and hoped for French support when the Revolution broke out there. The Stadholder fled, but the revolution ultimately failed when Napoleon seized power and was defeated in 1815. After that The Dutch Republic became a kingdom (absolutist monarchy at first) with Willem V's son as the sovereign King William I (1815-1840). Despite the fact that the Patriots had been responsible for a first official – even by today's standards far-reaching – Revolutionary Republican Constitution that included the equal rights of all citizens (1798), this Constitution was annulled by the King. Only in 1848 would a parliamentary system be introduced with more contained (electoral) rights however for citizens than before. Basic social rights such as the right to education, labor, health care, housing social security were added only much later (in 1983). It would take until 1919 before there was (again) universal male and female suffrage.

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- ^v Neiman, S. *Moral clarity; A guide for grown-up idealists*, 2008 Princeton University Press 2009 (revised ed.)
- ^{vi} Bentham, J. *Nonsense on stilts (Anarchical Fallacies)*, 1796 in: Schofield, Ph. (ed.) *The collected works of Jeremy Bentham*, Cambridge University Press, 1968 – present day
- ^{vii} The Charter of the United Nations, San Francisco, 26-06-1945 declares its primary objective as follows:
"To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace." (art. 1.1)
And adds:
"All Members, in order to ensure to all of them the rights and benefits resulting from membership, shall fulfil in good faith the obligations assumed by them in accordance with the present Charter." (art. 2.2)
- ^{viii} For further reading see Van der Kooij's discussion paper *The European deficit*, ISSR 04 2024
- ^{ix} Hobbes, T. *Leviathan [or The Matter, Forme & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil]*, 1651, Oxford University Press, Noel Malcolm (ed.) 2012