

On intuition, truth and lie

"Reason requires a personal effort and an individual attitude opposing the common view." Hubert Dethier

Human life is characterized by profound polarities and ambiguities. These polarities and ambiguities occur between conception, birth and death, after which the great silence sets in. The more our consciousness opens up to the tensions between our cosmological time boundaries (perhaps one second in the life of Brahman) and the never-ending reality in which we exist, the more each day of our lives becomes a challenge and a journey of discovery.

From the consciousness of our mortality, we become immortal: immortal in the sense of time-conscious people who take part in the existence of many generations.

The finitude of our existence forces us to an ongoing choice in relation to an infinite series of possible actions. The inevitability of these choices, from sunrise to sunset and from sunset to sunrise, brings up the question of the sources of morality. I will not answer this question from the viewpoint of the transcendent religions, but from the viewpoint of the humanist tradition. Such an attempt is a first indication that very diverse answers are apparently being given to the question of the origin of morality, and specifically, of the origin of the lie.

Although I am personally of the opinion that man has an inherent value consciousness, whereby I find the image of sources of morality to be a meaningful metaphor, this view is challenged by many philosophers and ethicists, and among them humanists. Greatly simplified and generalized, one can argue that there is a dichotomy in Western philosophy regarding the question of the origin of morality. Plato places the origin in the world of ideas, specifically in the idea *goodness*, which, in turn, is part of the threesome *truth*, *goodness* and *beauty*. These three platonic ideas subsequently find their coherence in the idea of *oneness* or *the one*. The premise behind the platonic world of ideas is the presence of a spiritual reality which is related to our directly perceptible reality of the billions of forms and manifestations. The relationship between the spiritual and the perceptible reality has been understood in a variety of ways ranging from negative to positive. This platonic view of Greek philosophy has not gone unchallenged. Contemporaries of Plato, for example the sophist Protagoras, doubt the presence of such a reality and defend a strongly relativistic viewpoint concerning truth and morality. If man is seen as the measure of things, then he functions as such especially in the

domain of truth and values. The Stoics will follow the same line in their own way and they stress the finitude of human life with all its caprice in order to counterpose it with a moral attitude of *ataraxia*, imperturbability. However vulnerable man is, he can try to acknowledge his lot with dignity and refuse to let himself be thrown off balance. In this way, Seneca can die a worthy death. The self-chosen, conscious suicide of Socrates and Seneca has traditionally been a source of inspiration to a number of humanists in their strife for an autonomous, moral attitude toward life. These humanists belong to the proponents of the right to decide about ending one's own life. The Stoic morality is an expression of a pagan, philosophical-materialistic and ethical standpoint. This standpoint is again expressed by the 12th century Arab humanist Averroës; by the 16th century humanist Pomponazzi, who threw doubt on the existence of an immortal soul; and by Voltaire in the 18th century. In the 20th century, philosophers such as Bertrand Russell, Sartre and many others will describe the human situation and morality as an excellent example of the domain of individual responsibility in which we are unable to fall back on a revealed morality or an inborn conscience, or on sources of a morality which would lie deeply hidden in our human consciousness. The cosmos knows no plan or goal. In this tradition of humanism, man stands naked before his own mirror as a *sujet trouvé*, as a found object in this vertiginous universe. He cannot fall back on any moral authority, revelation or moral regulation other than that of himself. The humanists who adhere to this view are often courageous people. They acknowledge the principle of *ni dieu, ni maître*. Because of the lack of objective, generally applicable moral criteria, they can and should be called to account on the basis of their concrete behavior and the values hidden therein.

The subjectivist view of morality has become dominant at the end of the 20th century, due, in part, to the influence of a far-reaching value relativism in postmodernism. Concerning his fellow man and history, the autonomous individual need only answer to himself. So, it does not require much fantasy to imagine how millions of people who share this kind of standpoint eventually bump into each others' boundaries and end up debating about the boundaries of each others' individual freedom. And with this we are back to Plato's dialogues, in which Socrates repeatedly formulates his ethical questions, to which he himself, whether sincerely or not, does not know the answer. For a limitless value-relativism is not only a philosophical standpoint, but also a moral standpoint. The sentence: *there is no truth and value higher than the individual*, is a statement that carries the pretension of being applicable to everyone. And as soon as a statement applies to everyone, it

becomes universal and therefore vulnerable, because it is not strictly individual. This kind of relativistic assertion betrays a certainty about human existence that resembles an imaginary center of gravity à la Archimedes from which to disrupt the world, more than it reflects an inherently evident standpoint. Thus, after 2500 years of philosophizing, we are back to square one. It appears to be a hopeless situation and, in a certain sense, it is. But for the very same reason, it is also extremely fascinating. It shows that in the most essential areas of human existence, namely the domains of truth and values, there is no question of progress. After hundreds of years, man is still as puzzling to himself as he was in Homer's *Odyssey* or in the book of *Genesis*.

Now I would like to sketch another tradition in humanism. This tradition originates with Pythagoras and Plato and can be described as a pagan philosophical-spiritual tradition. In this tradition, the accent probably falls less on morality and, thus, the idea of goodness, and more on truth and beauty with the idea of *the one* as an indication of the hidden coherence in our cosmos. It is a tradition that flourished in hermetic gnosis in Alexandria in the first century; in the neo-platonism of Plotinus; in Arab humanism and the humanism of the Florentine Academy in the second half of the 15th century; in kabbalism and alchemy; and in freemasonry since the 18th century. It became visible in the 19th and 20th century in the work of artists and writers such as William Blake, Comte de Lautréamont, Marcel Duchamp, Thomas Mann, Harry Mulisch and Camille Paglia. Certain trends in feminism and in the ecological movement can also be counted in this tradition.

Thus, pagan humanism - as distinguished from christian humanism - has two trends which differ from each other in their cosmology and ontology. Parallel to these different ontologies, these two trends also embody a different anthropology and morality.

The first tradition that I described has a strong empirical tendency. In other words, human consciousness is understood as an empty slate which is gradually filled in under the influence of education. Essentially external norms and values are introjected and subsequently become an integral part of our personal value consciousness. For this reason, people can even be prepared to die for their country and be willing to obey the most divergent commands as if they were doing nothing more than practicing their own values.

The second tradition that I described has a strong rationalistic tendency. That means that human consciousness is not understood as an empty slate but as a reservoir of patterns and intuitive insights and values which the conscious person gradually discovers

and integrates into his or her behavior. In this tradition of humanism, truth is not primarily an invention, but a discovery. This rationalistic view does not exclude an interaction between strong external influences and intuitive insights: on the contrary. By intuitive insights, I mean insights linked to and originating from an immediate experience which then crystallize on a conscious level. In my opinion, the intuitive strategy, followed by conscious reflection, is a more complex way of thinking about truth and values than the strictly empirical approach which denies man an innate consciousness of truth and values. By expressing a preference for the standpoint of the intuitive strategy, I have committed myself. In my oration "On human dignity" (1992) the reasoning for my viewpoint is as follows:

We can only reflect on reality by assuming that *something* exists, and that *something* is threatening or liberating; pleasurable or painful; structured or chaotic. This elementary experience of being derives its meaning from our intuition, and our intuition can be convinced of its validity without being able to prove it.

The Cretan, Epimenides, gained immortality with his liar paradox: "All Cretans are liars." This statement breaks through the usual dichotomy of true and false statements. If Epimenides is right in his statement that all Cretans are liars, he falsifies his assertion; and if he is wrong, he also falsifies it. The problem with Epimenides' statement is that author and saying are locked into the same loop. They cannot escape each other. This loop is the core of the human condition, for in each human life, speaker and saying are identical.

For a long time, it was thought that the problem of Epimenides' statement was due to the ambiguity of our language expressions, until the mathematician Gödel published his Incompleteness Theorem in 1931. A tremor went through the circles of logicians and mathematicians. Gödel demonstrated that the system of the *Principia Mathematica* of Russell and Whitehead was "incomplete".

Douglas Hofstadter concluded from this that provability is a weaker notion than truth, irrespective of the axiomatic system being considered. The thought is disturbing, but liberating at the same time.¹

If provability is not only a weaker notion than truth but also a less general one, then it follows that the domain of truth is a circle which surrounds the square of provable statements. The jump that we have to make in our consciousness to let the range of this

relationship between truth and provability penetrate is quite substantial. It supposes that we attribute a fundamental meaning and value to the intuitive idea of truth without expecting to fully understand what that truth implies in its entirety. It is similar to the concept *zero*. The concept *zero* cannot be imagined but, at the same time, we cannot overestimate the significance of it. It is the condition for being able to think about freedom and death, but also for being able to be overdrawn at the bank or for the designing of a computer program.

Just as the idea of *truth* precedes every argumentation, the idea of *goodness* precedes our moral considerations. Even if we are not able to describe the idea *goodness*, let alone prove it, the intuitive idea of *goodness* is the condition for developing positive interpersonal values.

The time-honored debate about universalism versus relativism, or rather, the question whether universal values encompassing all people exist versus the question whether all values and norms are strictly context-bounded, is, in my opinion, the wrong approach. Prior to beginning the debate on universalism versus relativism, we have to ask ourselves why does every person and every society develop values? My answer to the question is that human intuition is not only and inevitably directed towards truth, but also to values, both ethical and aesthetic, without being able to give specific answers in advance concerning which values. The intuitive domain of truth, goodness and beauty forms an original unity which is defeated within our fragmented world of experience in the course of our upbringing and schooling. The discovery of this intuitive domain takes place in every human life via the discovery of the lie. I quote again from my oration: "A child that is conscious of its first lie, discovers the idea of truth at that same moment. By lying, the child leaves the domain of intuition and immediacy. It leaves paradise to enter the world of oppositions."²

From this analysis it follows that in the depth structure of consciousness, every person carries an intuitive awareness of truth and values within himself so that we can meaningfully speak about the presence of a spiritual dimension in man. The consciousness of truth, goodness and beauty precedes the thousands, if not millions, of statements people make about what is specifically and concretely true, good and beautiful. However relative this kind of statement turns out to be, our moral statements derive their power from the non-definable presence of what Spinoza calls the *amor intellectualis*. Intellectual love is not only the driving force behind man's endless search, it also liberates us from an egocentric experience of self. This desire, this *amor intellectualis*, originates in an intuitive

consciousness of the fundamental connection of all people and of mankind with nature. A morality in which each one of us is his or her own alpha and omega blocks the feeling of solidarity that can be the only source of moral actions not exclusively based on utility and self-interest. The beauty of human existence does not manifest itself in individual isolation, but in openness to the inexhaustible manifestations of reality. Our moral strength does not lie in the uniformity of norms and rules but in the transformation of them to concrete people, each of which gives form to the idea of humanity. The concept *humanity* is an abstraction in the sense that we will not see humanity outside on the street. However, we do see people who express a common fate in their body and their consciousness; people who realize that their body and mind all originate from the same reality. This realization is also the reason that various worldviews ascribe such a special position to man. In the christian worldview, man is created in God's image, by which he shares in the infinite, nameless godhead. In buddhism, man also has an exceptional position because only human beings can attain enlightenment. In the Greek hellenistic tradition, we find the idea of man as a microcosm reflecting and embodying the macrocosm. The statement of Thomas of Aquinas: *intellectus est quodammodo omnia* - the intellect is, in a certain sense, everything - can be understood in this way. If man embodies all the forces and hidden patterns of the universe, then his position is indeed exceptional. From this viewpoint, it is true that he lacks any answer to any problem whatsoever, but because of this, man's search is inevitable, desirable and meaningful.

It also explains that man does not let himself be completely determined. It explains that even after decades of political oppression and dictatorship, people still revolt. If man shares in a visible and invisible reality, and by invisible reality I mean intuitive truth and value consciousness, then no political system can definitively suppress man's hidden desire for openness and unity. For with every birth, the process begins again. And every person who can transform the fear of death into an acceptance of it is a free person, subordinate to no one.

Which brings us back to my first sentence: human life is characterized by profound polarities and ambiguities. If I defend the position that the intuitive idea of goodness is the source of human morality, then this does not imply a number of practical rules of life or specific norms such as whether killing is justified or not, or judgements about monogamy versus polygamy, but it implies that human actions are a part of a permanent process of creation and destruction. If human consciousness is not a passive, primarily registrative consciousness, but rather an active

consciousness driven by all kinds of needs, thus a creative consciousness, then concrete actions are important for ourselves, for others and for nature. Moreover, if we are conscious that our cosmological time is limited by our death, then every day and every night is a one-time-only chance for what we do or do not do. No one can escape this human condition. I see indifference towards this non-repetitiveness of our cosmic time as a form of minimal, almost vegetative existence. It is lack of intensity and openness that leads to emotional and spiritual starvation.

Indifference to the effects of our deeds is perhaps the most evil and widespread phenomenon afflicting our world. It is the quiet indifference and cheap complacency, this unconscious alliance between governors and governed, that is responsible for the failure of the Western world in former Yugoslavia. In search of the sources of this collective indifference, it is tempting to reduce the causes to that strange mix of omnipresent bureaucratic rules and pacifying consumerism. However, this reduction is insufficient for understanding the phenomenon of the great indifference. I think there is a deeper reason. In the process of secularization and the subsequent process of individualization of the last two hundred years, christianity has lost its monopoly position in the domain of truth and values to liberals, freemasons, humanists, evolutionists, marxists, structuralists, postmodernists, nationalists and nihilists. The reaction to the transcendent value and truth consciousness of christianity was so radical that although it is true that Western philosophy has secured its autonomous position vis a vis every revealed truth, it has paid the victory in its battle with christian tradition with the loss of its intuitive consciousness. The domain of intuitive insights and experiences has become the domain of writers and artists, of psychics and taxi drivers, but it is no longer or hardly ever the domain of philosophers. It is as if philosophers do not want to see. In the wake of philosophers and ethicists, the truth and value consciousness of millions of people has detached itself from the original, universal experience that every lie presupposes an intuitive consciousness of truth. And this bankrupts the a priori status of the unnamable, intuitive idea of truth, as well as that of the lie itself.

The naive idea some people have that lying is always bad betrays a consciousness in which truth is not only a great good, but is also inherently linked to goodness. Although this view correctly reflects the original, intimate relationship of truth and goodness, I still call it naive. Indeed, it supposes that speaking the truth is always better than lying, while always speaking the truth can lead to a wide assortment of disasters, as every resistance fighter knows. The same naive idea that lying is always bad also supposes that one

ascribes a dominant position to language in the relationship of truth and language, while language is primarily a form of communication. Language belongs primarily to the domain of meanings and not necessarily to the domain of truths. The meaning of a sentence depends on who says what to whom in which context. The truth of a speaker is not necessarily the truth of the listener. What is true within a certain context is not necessarily true in another context. That is why an explicit consciousness of a certain truth can lead to withholding that truth in a certain context, or even to a lie, in order to expressly hide that specific truth. On this level, both speaking the truth and withholding it, and the conscious misleading of the listeners by means of a lie, are a manifestation of intuitive truth consciousness and of human freedom. The conscious lie proves the possibility of individual freedom. Indeed, withholding the truth or lying shows the speaker's suspicion that a specific truth will not be understood as the speaker understands it or is affected by it. Whether the speaker is right is difficult to say with certainty, and certainly not afterwards. The essential question here, and in the following sequence, is a homage to the truth, the lie and the withholding of the truth as conscious forms of human communication. Only a person who is aware that his or her lies are an indirect manifestation of a deeper truth and freedom consciousness will use the lie as an expression of free consciousness and actions. Formulated in this way, it becomes clear that the consciousness of truth and morality essentially go hand in hand, even in the use of the lie.

The question arises whether, by reasoning in this way, I am not opening Pandora's box. Seemingly I am, but not in the long run! The language use of a mafioso is pervaded with lies because he realizes that what is good for him is apparently not good or less good for others. Indirectly he shows the time-honored insight that truth and goodness go hand and hand. He isolates his own reality and interests from those of the injured parties by means of the lie and the silence, by means of violence and money. What remains here of the intention of this argument, in which the lie is preceded by an intuitive consciousness of truth, and in which the lie can be understood as an expression of free actions? What differentiates a mafioso who withholds the truth from a resistance fighter who refuses to name other resistance fighters? Is this only another kind of morality which, from a radical value relativism, cancels the other out? Is there a difference between the one silence and the other; between the one lie and the other?

It seems to be an impossible formulation of the problem. And yet our intuition tells us that these two forms of silence and lying do not have the same moral content. The lies and the silence of the

mafioso are prompted by his making an absolute law of his own interests, while the lie and the silence of the resistance fighter in a situation of lack of rights, can have as goal the opposite of lawlessness. The mafioso's relationship to his truth that inevitably precedes his lie is a relationship in which he has isolated his truth, i.e. his interests, from those of a larger community and from his society. His truth and his lie are identical: one can no longer identify any reciprocal hierarchy in it. Both of them, the truth as well as the lie, have become purely instrumental. Both serve solely his own interests and that of his family or clan. In both cases, a partial interest has been made absolute, and therefore in conflict with the intuitive idea of the truth which is non-instrumental and non-particularistic. While the lie of the resistance fighter is also instrumental, it derives its moral content from a value consciousness that is not instrumental. It is a value consciousness that is applicable, in principle, to many, if not all, people.

Traditional education teaches children that speaking the truth is good and that lying is, thus, reprehensible. This kind of educational ideal places truth and language on the same level and, from the very beginning, makes children vulnerable in a society in which the contradictions are so great that the identification of lie and immorality becomes untenable. In totalitarian systems such an education can lead to citizens being able to be manipulated even more than they are now. If only political leaders, opinion makers, intellectuals and big businessmen use truth and lies instrumentally, the prospects for the citizen appear gloomy. In that case, one should "fight fire with fire" and thus, the lie with a lie.

But the moral criterium for lying and withholding information is always the original, intuitive value consciousness that precedes every first lie, and that - although unnamable and indefinable - continues to show every person the way to an area of experience beyond the accepted contradictions. It would be a blessing if philosophers and ethicists would again explore the domain of the intuition and not leave this special task to poets and artists only.

The theory of the double truth, which Hubert Dethier regards so highly, shows the same insight in an analogous way.

"Pomponazzi developed the lie to an extreme by a very varied use of double truth and a partial application of the dialectic method. With Pompanazzi there can be no question of an absolute truth which would mean the end of every form of thinking. As long as thinking is active, the truth cannot be complete, and thinking has to take the digression and the lie into account. They are the shadow of the endeavor to find the truth and to speak it, so that the digression

and the lie make the truth possible. Thus truth cannot be understood as other than ambiguous."³
Intuition, truth and lie are an inseparable trio.

Fons Elders

1. F. Elders, "On Human Dignity," in *Humanism Toward the Third Millennium*, VUB Press, Brussels 1993, pp. 31-32.

2. Idem, p. 34.

3. The Freethinkers' Lexicon, a series of publications of the Free University Brussels, is an impressive testimony to the philosophic struggle toward autonomous insight, a pursuit that I designate here with the words "pagan humanism".