

In Search of a 'New Morality' for South African Education

Part 1: Preliminary Deliberations: Between Fundamentalism and Relativism

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Samevatting

Hierdie is die eerste van 'n aantal artikels waarin die moontlikhede van morele heropbou deur middel van opvoeding vir Suid-Afrika ondersoek word. Die onderhawige studie is 'n poging om 'n raamwerk te verskaf waarbinne die verskynsel van veranderende waarde interpretasies geplaas kan word. As sodanig omvat dit 'n kort perspektief op die opkoms en ontwikkeling van historisme, die grondoorsaak vir die oorgang vanaf fundamentalisme na relativisme, asook 'n kort waardebeplanning daarvan.

1. Motivation

Of late, South Africans have been dismayed by an apparent lack of morality rampant in our society. The great extent of corruption – not only in the private sector but also in our civil service – revealed by investigating agencies and disclosed in the news media, compels us to rethink the whole question of *values education* as a major objective for national education.

As education is a value-oriented and value-driven enterprise where educators endeavour to introduce normatively un- (under-) developed persons to values in the hope that the latter will accept the desired principles to regulate their future actions, it is understandable that public education will be targeted as main area where education for moral regeneration can be launched under the direct supervision and control of the authorities. With this in mind, a so-called *morality renewal programme*

has already been initiated by the Ministry of Education to address this serious dilemma on an on-going basis (cf. the 2001 Conference that was held at Kirstenbosch, Cape Town under the patronage of a previous Minister of Education, Kader Asmal). At the same time, the office of the former Vice-President of South Africa also started a campaign for moral regeneration.

Against this background, what is to follow is an attempt to contribute to this admirable enterprise from a Christian point of view. This is the first of a number of essays that will examine the question of values and values education from different angles. In Part 1, the current *tension that exists between fundamentalism and relativism* is explored. This preparatory investigation is considered essential, for to embark on a multi-faceted exploration of the realm of values and assess their effect on human behaviour in general and education in particular without at least attempting to delineate the framework within which to place the phenomenon of shifting value interpretations will impact negatively on our ensuing investigations. In Part 2 the *origin, nature and compass of values* will be investigated; in Part 3 the *central role of values in education* will be examined, while Part 4 will conclude our study by outlining how *moral regeneration through education* can counteract the contemporary challenge of value relativism.

2. Opening remarks

Since the late 18th century, Western society has undergone a fundamental transition from completely authoritarian to – ostensibly – “emancipated.”¹ Former “sure grounds”, time-honoured truths and once well-established values have been brushed aside, while religious disbelief and moral disintegration have become commonplace. A general and ever-growing spirit of scepticism and uncertainty has culminated in the invalidation of values like *honesty, integrity, chastity, virtue, responsibility, decorum, modesty, diligence, thrift, obedience, respect* and so forth. All these have forfeited their timeless validity and have become *relative*, of little consequence and literally “all things to all men” (cf. Bloom, 1987: 26-28; Bauman, 1992: xxiii; Zecha, s.a.: 8, 10, 13). In recent times, this *value relativism* regarding the principles and customs that regulate human life has become a distinctive feature of a variety of influential contemporary viewpoints like *personalism, pragmatism, existentialism, neo-Marxism* (Critical Theory) and *post-modernism*.

1 In the sense used by Adorno (1950).

Nonetheless, instead of satisfying euphoric expectations of genuine liberation from domination by external powers, of an unconstrained future for the individual person, this radical change has brought much confusion, insecurity, misery and anxiety to ordinary men and women. Indeed, any individualist interpretation of values – pursued to its final consequences – by definition harbours within itself the danger that it may either jeopardize the freedom of others, or deteriorate into *relativism*, *nihilism* and eventually total *anarchy*. Small wonder that there is growing alarm in consequence of, and opposition to, this dream of liberating humanity from the restraints of external bondage of whatever kind.

The need to rethink matters relating to values and values education in our day must be considered and evaluated against this backdrop. As values have a direct bearing on interpersonal relationships as well as on our association with animals, plants and things, values education has become a crucial matter for the survival, not only of the human race, but also of our natural environment. However, the fields of values and values education are keenly contested. This is evidenced by the many and divergent viewpoints on the matter, currently reflected in *oeuvres* on this highly controversial issue. In the final analysis, the vital question is whether *relativism* and worse will be the ultimate destiny of our civilization.

This paper comprises a brief perspective on the rise and development in the Western world of *historicism*, the primary source of the transition from *fundamentalism* to *relativism*, as well as an assessment thereof.

3. On the threshold of relativism

Since the Renaissance of the 14th century, there has been a distinct feeling of dissonance, even irritation among members of the Church with the legalistic way in which it imposed (and still imposes) certain policies and conventions on its members (Troost, 1958:16 ff, cf. Smit, 1985: 6). These comprised a detailed and concretised set of rules outlined by theologians to control human conduct under all circumstances.² Yet, rigid and inflexible laws – in principle – exclude the possibility of individual judgment and concomitant personal accountability. The above-mentioned attitude of general displeasure and defiance, initially confined to the ranks of scientists, eventually permeated to ordinary men and women. It paved

2 This *casuist* policy of the church implied that a specific rule or law was prescribed for every likely case (L. *casus*).

the way for a fundamentally new mental attitude, namely an acute awareness of what is *uniquely individual* during the process of *historical change*. This perception gradually became of greater significance to people than the laws imposed by authorities of church and state.

The 19th century heralded the decline of undisputed faith and unreserved confidence in the powers of human reason and general rationality. This mind-set was replaced with a noticeable sensitivity for the significance of human individuality and the peculiarity of historical events. In this altered mindset, the *unique design* of the individual person in a one-off, never-to-be-repeated *historical situation* would eventually become the unqualified – though inherently *relativist* – ideal of and criterion for knowledge, against which reality would in future be assessed and explicated. Contrary, then, to *rationalism* that entirely overrated (absolutized) knowledge regarding the *universal* side of reality, budding *irrationalism* over-emphasized – at the expense of every form of universality – that which is *personal* and *distinct*. Therefore, the traditional emphasis that was placed on the universality of human reason with its attending ideal of acquiring *conceptual knowledge* was inverted in favour of a growing awareness and understanding of the significance of what is essentially *exceptional*, *unique* and *contingent* (cf. Strauss, 2002: 226).

Thus the foundations were laid of what would evolve, towards the end of the 19th century, as *historicism*, a philosophical position according to which all *cultural phenomena* (institutions, organizations, values, convictions, traditions, techniques and the like) would henceforth be regarded as outcomes of *historical development*. History – on its part – came to be understood as an all-embracing and never-ending process of *development* and *progress* that determines inherently every aspect of human existence and reality, including – especially – its values (cf. Zuidema, 1948: 4ff). For this reason, historical thought – supported by the methods of historical criticism – would from this time forth be widely acknowledged as the *only* dependable route to insight into the enigmas of the human condition.

During the course of the 19th and 20th centuries this impulse towards historicism was also manifested in a fundamental shift from a boundless ethical and religious optimism and self-assurance rooted in a naïve and uncritical belief in the absolute nature of Christianity to a profound cynicism regarding all cultural and moral values. This sceptic and pessimistic frame of mind, with its ever-increasing frustration, feelings of insecurity and general despondency, eventually resulted in an all-encompassing mood of *relativism* that virtually paralysed the spiritual life of the Western world.

As has been suggested above, the basic postulate of historicism is that of *continuity*. Historicists understand our world as *inherently dynamic* and therefore subjected to *eternal change*. This ontological position would subsequently deeply alter our understanding of reality. It amounted to a theoretical cancellation of the boundaries separating modes (ways) of human existence, as well as dissimilar entity structures like state, church and so forth. In future, these boundaries would be considered as *arbitrary*, *traversable* and therefore *relative*.

Historicism posed a serious challenge for whatever humanity might want to choose as its everlastingly secure and undeviating point of departure. This was especially true in the case of the previously held tradition of the irrefutability of cultural and moral values, criteria, standards and norms, including those of the church, its official dogmas and ultimately the absolute truth of the Christian religion itself (cf. Klapwijk, 1970: 47, 239-241). Before long all values were rejected as completely relative, while ultimate Christian truths were cast off and disparaged as *historically indefensible*. For two centuries *historicism* with its attendant *relativism* flourished, and slew its millions.³ As such, it lies at the root of the spiritual powerlessness and impotence of modern men and women who are inexorably swept away by the unchecked *nihilism* of our times (cf. Klapwijk, 1970: 50, 373; cf. also Grondin, 1991: 14).

In addition, and in step with its *nominalist* precursor in the 14th century (cf. Elseviers, 1968:), modern *historicism* represents a significant attempt to emancipate the human spirit from its enslavement by narrow-minded, harsh and allegedly irrefutable dogma of whatever origin (cf. Dooyeweerd, 1965: 61-112, 75ff). Like *nominalism*⁴ it also abandons the notion that there exist – *beyond* and *apart from the human mind* – certain *universal conditions* or *laws* (a so-called “order for” things) that to all intents and purposes determine the individual existence of particular phenomena.⁵ In addition, it dismisses the inexorable and mandatory *subordination* and *law-conformable existence* of correlating *subjects* (a

3 Cf., in this regard, the impact of *historical materialism* (Marxist critical social theory), as well as the numerous forms of Marxist revisionism on Western thinking during the 20th century.

4 L. *nominalis*: of or pertaining to names.

5 In opposition to Thomas Aquinas's realism, William of Ockham denied the existence of abstract concepts *outside the human mind*, maintaining that *universals* are mere names (L. *nomen*) without any objective value of their own, never existing *ante rem* (in the mind of the Creator) or *in re* as supposed *eidōs* or “essence” of a thing, but only *post rem*, that is, *in mente humana* (Dooyeweerd, 1955: 386-7, cf. 386ff).

so-called “orderliness of” things) to this array of all-encompassing and universally applicable laws. Instead of yielding to what was perceived as a momentous violation of human liberty, its ultimate objective has been – at all times – the empowerment of humanity in the hope of establishing a society rich in new, creative possibilities. The eventual liberation of men and women from an oppressed, anxious, uninformed, narrow-minded, superstitious and dogmatically “sealed” condition was envisioned. No longer would external authorities such as state, church, philosophy, art, science, tradition, etc., coerce men and women to believe uncritically ostensibly infallible dogma regarding so-called eternal truths and values. Indeed, a liberated community of enlightened spirits who would eventually be capable of choosing their own values in total freedom and with complete competence was envisaged throughout.

Values – on their part – were understood to be the products of *discontinuity* and *contingency*, of the *unique* demands of a *diversity* of *ever-changing* situations and *unforeseen* events, in that they relate to *particular* cultural circumstances and a *definite historical* era. Therefore, they were considered essentially arbitrary in nature, varying from person to person, from situation to situation and from epoch to epoch (cf., Dooyeweerd, 1963: 175). Their influence were understood to be forever *relative* because they fluctuate with the rise and fall of cultures, waxing and waning with the passing of time. As values can claim validity only in relation (and relative) to a certain historical context, and since universally valid criteria for human conduct are denied in principle (cf. *supra*, also Smit, 1985: 6), it becomes clear why value systems of whatever nature are at present regarded by most as having equal merit and validity (cf. Zecha, s.a.: 8).

Historicism is, then, the complete antipode of both naturalist determinism⁶ and casuist authoritarianism. Its rejection of the existence of *universal conditions* for different situations instated humankind itself as the ultimate and indisputable measure for all things. *Subjective preference* would in future become the ultimate authority and primary criterion for human conduct. By thus “privatizing” (Bauman, 1992: xxiii) values and relegating them to the level of mere *individual* (on occasion collective) predilections and options, everyone becomes free to choose – in complete self-determination and solely in terms of personal priorities – the criteria

6 Naturalism perceives human activities as fundamentally determined by the need to satisfy material or physical (animal) wants, drives and desires; cf. also *Footnote* 10.

and standards that will ultimately regulate his/ her actions and deeds. Human conduct thus becomes a matter of “individual discretion, risk-taking, chronic uncertainty and never-placated qualms” (Bauman, 1992: xxiii; cf. also Smit, 1985: 5-6; Strauss, s.a.: 13).

This wavering and indecisive frame of mind regarding standards for human conduct eventually gave rise to the ever recurring and large-scale yearning for *brand new values*, for what Joseph Fletcher calls a *new morality* that would answer to the special demands of persons who act in complete independence from the restraints of dogma and convention in anticipation of an unsullied world of tomorrow (cf. 1978: 26).

4. Critical perspective on fundamental assumptions of historicism

4.1 *Universals and advancing relativism*

It has been noted above that historicism is rooted in 14th century *nominalism*. The latter can be credited with the dubious honour of having initiated the process that effectively undermined the Biblical belief in God’s creation of everything after its own kind. Thus, we were systematically deprived of two fundamental truths, namely (1) the existence of a determining and limiting (creational) *law* that holds – without exception – for every individual thing, situation or whatever, and (2) that all phenomena possess an intrinsic and characterizing law-conformity or “orderliness”. Historicism succeeded in bringing this process of ever-progressing relativism to its peak. As has transpired above, for the historicist the whole concept of *universals* is a misleading and erroneous attempt by rationalists to account for the reality we live in. As *universal conditions* – employed by rationalists to explicate reality – are inconceivable apart from the experience of individual human subjects, they are untenable (Strauss, 2002: 215ff). In their place, the fundamental *individuality* and *changeableness* of all perceptible things enjoy precedence. Society, state, justice, morality, religion, art – even humanity itself – are seen as being in a state of *pointless* and *insignificant* “becoming”, ever-evolving, caught up in a never-ending and meaningless progression to an unidentified destination. Nonetheless, this self-same conception presupposes nothing but *universality* itself. Indeed, as it is understood to apply to *all things at all times*, the very rejection of universality “inescapably assumes universality” (Strauss, 2002: 225).

The denial of the existence of a universal structural order outside the human mind abandons all facets of reality – that are without exception regarded as structureless (cf. Strauss, s.a.: 7) – once and for all to an unqualified and uncontainable relativism. To maintain that human conduct

is determined by historical variability alone is a fallacy. It erroneously relegates the co-determining role and function of all *non-historical* facets of human life (morality, jurisprudence, aesthetics, economics, linguistics etc) to the realm of the inconsequential.⁷

The historicist rejection of the existence of distinct and dissimilar non-historical modes of human existence (moral, juridical, psychical, biotic, physical etc.), each with its characteristic and exclusive sphere of meaning and special competence, as well as the postulate that non-historical phenomena are nothing but historical developments and therefore manifestations of history, confronts us with a *contradiction in terms*. Only a non-historical phenomenon can have a history: what *is* history cannot at the same time *have* a history. If everything is considered “history”, then history itself forfeits its meaning. A *history of history* simply does not make sense. History itself exists only in its relation to and in conjunction with a *trans-historic* dimension that can be ignored only at the peril of denying the historical as well (cf. Strauss, s.a.: 12; Jonas, 1974: 242). To be sure, the self-evident existence of a fundamental structure pertaining to every individual and discrete aspect of reality, every concrete thing, event or whatever, is irrefutable proof of a fundamental *constancy*, a *universal characteristic outside the human mind* to which *every* particular entity – in its “being individual” – conforms (Strauss, s.a.: 7).

Indeed, no lesser sage than Plato recognized the fact that *change* always implies *constancy*. It can be established only against the backdrop of and in relation to something that remains essentially *unchanged* (cf. Strauss, s.a.: 11; cf. Grondin, 1991: 14). As point of reference, this latter (unchangeable) entity functions in such a way that it cannot, at the same time, be completely changeable too. Thus, the *ever-changing* world of economics remains – despite all historic change – essentially an economic phenomenon. It can never become, for instance, an ethical, social, historical, physical, biotic, numerical or whatever matter. And economic values pertain to economics *exclusively*. Within the encompassment of the *constant* (universal) *structure* of each different (non-historical) facet of

7 Paradoxically, despite their justified acknowledgement of the “universal (conditioning) role of *historicity* and *linguisticity*” (Strauss, 2002: 225) – also for the problems pertaining to values and their (timeless or passing) validity – modern day historicists ignore the state of affairs that there are *other*, equally important and demonstrable “functional (or: modal) conditions” (like, e.g., the *ethical*, as well as other non-historical and non-linguistic *normative* aspects of reality) that are valid for and embrace human life (cf. Strauss, 2002: 225).

our world, certain developments and resulting changes appear that make it possible to speak meaningfully of – for instance – the history of economics, the history of jurisprudence, the history of art, the history of philosophy, etc. (cf. Strauss, s.a.: 12). This significant ontological insight exposes the inner untenability of historicism. Moreover, the fact that the formation of concepts, as well as logical argumentation can only take place in terms of universals (cf. Strauss, s.a.: 13) highlights the truth that an “order for” (with an accompanying “orderliness of”) phenomena does exist outside the human mind.

This irrefutable state of affairs, however, does not undermine the legitimate demand by historicists for the recognition of the “historicity”, the transience of the world we live in.⁸ *Universality* and *contingency* are two demonstrable sides of the very same reality. Both rationalists and irrationalists correctly emphasize a *portion* of the whole truth. Universality as well as historicity co-determine human life. Only the *absolutization* of any one of the two (when recognition and acknowledgement of the reality of both *constancy* and *contingency* degenerate into either *fundamentalist casuistry*, or *relativism*, *nihilism* and *chaos*) leads to a serious misinterpretation of the multi-dimensionality of reality, with negative, if not disastrous consequences for our explication of the world we live in.

4.2 Facts, laws and values

As a result of 18th century Kantian idealism that postulated a clear-cut dualism between “what is” (exists) and “what ought” (should be) and the subsequent (supposedly) irreversible rift fabricated in later years by positivists between so-called neutral facts and committed values, the normative dimension of human life became ever more alienated from that of human rationality, particularly all scientific enterprises. As a matter of course, this dogma deluded scientists and laypeople alike into believing the fiction that certain areas of human endeavour (like, for instance, logic and science) were stripped of – as well as completely divorced from – any form of value-related accountability. In essence, this “paradigm” theoretically dispelled with the vital and fundamental unity and coherence

8 The initial and legitimate objective of historicism was clearly to accentuate the significance of uncertainty and chance (the uniquely individual, the unintended and unplanned, the contingent) in our explication of reality. It goes without saying that – *ab initio* – a clear and deliberate intent to yield completely to *relativism* on the part of historicists is hardly conceivable. Nonetheless, the pursuit of the contingency principle to its fullest consequence cannot escape this danger.

of human experience. This hypothetical fragmentation of an otherwise naturally and closely integrated human experience eventually developed into the central theoretic blueprint that held sway in scientific circles for the greater part of three centuries. It also established the same dualistic frame of reference that became fashionable in the case of every-day, non-scientific thinking. By virtue of the fundamental dichotomy it introduced, it gave rise to a completely artificial and unrealistic view of human life and the world, and a concomitant dualistic interpretation and explication of both.

Yet, despite a virtually worldwide adherence by modern scientists to this hypothesis, the reality of a universe that cannot be torn asunder in arbitrary human conjectures remains unaffected. In our naïve, non-scientific experience of reality we never encounter a fragmented reality. On the contrary, even a child will attest to the unity and coherence of its day-to-day experiences. The possibility of a so-called austere and disinterested, neutral and uncommitted scientific experience of reality – existing and operating in complete isolation from the various values that regulate the remaining non-logical aspects of human life – remains nothing but a figment of the imagination. In this tradition, true human freedom arises only where humanity has prevailed over its enslavement by its own desires and drives, and has wrested itself free from subservience to all sorts of supernatural and trans-personal authorities or powers.

In historicist thought, this fundamental dualism regarding the nature and status of *facts* and *values* is defended throughout. Reality is theoretically divided into two dissimilar and unconnected realms that exist in total isolation from one another, namely the *realm of facts* (the natural dimension of reality where *natural laws* apply) and the *realm of values* (the cultural dimension of reality where *cultural norms* or *principles* pertain). The realm of *laws* and *facts* (nature) is explored by the various (natural) *sciences* and their outcomes are considered *scientific*. Investigations into the realm of *values* are not considered scientific. Their outcomes (value judgments) are at most pre- or post-scientific. As only *factual judgments* and *value judgments* are recognized, and as it is accepted that factual judgments do not apply to the realm of values (in the same way as value judgments are irrelevant in the realm of facts), the nature and status of this *fundamental ruling* regarding facts and values (detailed above) becomes highly problematic. It is essentially self-refuting. If it is regarded as a *factual judgment*, it has nothing to say for the realm where value judgments hold sway. If – on the other hand – it is regarded as a *value judgment*, it has nothing to say for the realm where

factual judgments are valid. Therefore, as it is neither a *factual*, nor a *value judgment*, this historicist conjecture is completely irrelevant.

This also has clear anthropological implications, as it brings the question of the *normative freedom of choice* of every normal human being into focus. At this stage, a closer examination of the differences between (natural) *laws* and (cultural) *values* is necessary. *Values* differ from *laws* of nature in the sense that the latter *control* reality in as much as they are already *applied positively* to every likely situation. Natural laws that do not require human recognition exercise control over the realm of nature, leaving no possibility for non-compliance: no subject can transgress these laws *by design*. Thus, the law of gravity is applied positively to all subjects, under all circumstances, and at all times. On the other hand, the domain of *human culture* is ruled by *values* (*principles* or *norms*) that apply to all normative facets of human conduct. Humans, who are endowed with a *normative freedom of choice*, can either comply with, or transgress principles, although no anti-normative choice (disobedience) ever revokes or abolishes the norm (principle) that is transgressed. For instance, in the case of logical thinking, this state of affairs allows for *logically correct* (normative) as well as *logically incorrect* (anti-normative) or *illogical* thinking, argumentative discourse and the like. This absence of exact and rigid “laws” that hold good for and apply to every possible logical situation (argument) permit logical inconsistencies and errors during routine debate regarding day-to-day matters, but then *only* against the backdrop of *constant, unwavering, universal* principles that regulate logical thinking and argumentative discourse under all circumstances.

4.3 The peril of relativism

It has already been suggested that, notwithstanding all its positive features, the inevitable outcome of historicism – pursued to its final consequences – is uncontainable *relativism*. By rejecting the existence – outside the human mind – of universals, values are perceived as essentially *conditional* and *arbitrary*. They are *conditional* because there is no sure ground to which they connect. They are furthermore *arbitrary* because they are always subjective, i.e., favoured by individual men and women and valid only for themselves in specific (particular) and unique, contingent and ever-changing historical situations. This inherent *value relativism* is the unavoidable consequence of the ideal of the truly emancipated, enlightened and *avant-garde* personality who does not yield to either causal natural impulses or the dictates and directives of external authorities. As such, this hyper-individualistic position represents the

ultimate self-constitution of the free, autonomous and self-determining human personality (cf. Zuidema, 1948: 9-10). Yet, paradoxical as it may seem, despite the hypothetical realization of “true” human liberty, this *value relativism* unavoidably heralds the complete and final collapse of collective human morality. Values, totally devoid of a certain, timelessly valid compass of which the *essence*, the *deeper meaning*, transcends time and place, remain forever indefinite, incomplete and of little social consequence. What is more, it manoeuvres human society to the brink of nothingness and total despair.

4.4 The self-refuting nature of historicism

Historicism bears within itself the seed of its own undoing. It is essentially self-contradictory. If the postulate that *everything* we know and experience is *historically conditioned* (i.e., caught up in the inescapable process of birth, development, decline and demise), is meant to apply universally, then – surely – this very hypothesis is historically constrained and therefore not universal (Grondin, 1991: 13). It is, itself, *contingent*, *provisional* and *uncertain*, of mere passing significance and doomed to waste away and eventually expire. The truth is that what historicists zealously try to put across, i.e., the claim that everything we encounter in life is unique and non-recurrent, is nothing but an indication of a *universal condition for*, a structural characteristic that applies to all things (Strauss, s.a.: 7).

5. Alternative perspective on the nature of values

5.1 Restating the deep-seated significance of values for education⁹

Human conduct is a remarkably complicated and multi-faceted phenomenon. It is never “superficial”, in the sense that it is completely determined by external stimuli that trigger instinctive (primal) reactions, as is suggested by exponents of naturalism.¹⁰ With the exception of reflex actions and cases of extreme mental retardation or malfunction, normal

9 For an in-depth perspective on value-relativism in education as a science, the reader is referred to Zecha (1984).

10 Naturalism, in both its determinist and indeterminist guise, is *casuist* in the sense that it uncritically accepts human behaviour to be – *under all circumstances* – a direct response to inborn instincts and emotions. “Values” that regulate human actions are essentially hedonistic as they relate directly to the natural inclinations and desires that determine human conduct because they serve and support the survival of the individual. The pressure and coercion of an absolutized physical and biotic universe create a hermetically sealed natural order, making human freedom of choice and accountability

human conduct is always *premeditated* in that it presupposes *logical insight*. It is always preceded by inward deliberation (forethought) regarding norms (standards, criteria) for forthcoming deeds. We can, therefore, maintain that human conduct displays a regulative *depth-dimension* (cf. *infra*: 25-27) that is completely value oriented. Those values that regulate human conduct have a distinct (though relative) supra-individual character in that they relate to trans-personal influences that co-determine the actions of individual persons (cf. *infra*: 25-27). Through these values human premeditation is deeply committed to the *origin(s)* of these values. As explained above, deliberation on and the eventual assessment of possible options regarding potential lines of conduct are intentional “inner acts” that precede the actual behaviour of the responsible human person. They are value-focussed from the outset, and when they are ultimately translated into actions, these are also highly obligated and duty-bound. Therefore, it can be maintained that human behaviour is *intentional* and *value-driven* under all circumstances, rendering every human person *accountable* for his/ her actions.

In the light of the profound importance of values for education, a workable alternative that steers clear of the snares of either an *authoritarian casuism* or *indeterminist relativism* is of prime importance. It is also of special significance to those who contest both the *casuist* absolutization of so-called “universally valid” values, and the *historicist* hypothesis that universals do not exist outside the human mind. The possibility that, in the area of values, there exist only two radically opposing positions, namely *universalist authoritarianism* and *individualist indeterminism* is untenable. The prevalent and popular contradistinction in the realm of values between *historically outdated* (conservative, establishment, *status quo*) and *historically new* (progressive, “new deal”) is the inevitable outcome of reductionist thinking (cf. also Wolters, 1990: 78). In the final analysis, *only* the recognition of both *universal* and *contingent* elements in reality provides the key to the effective unravelling of this complex problem.

5.2 On the interdependence of universality and contingency

It is the fervent conviction of *post-modernists* – currently the most radical and influential manifestation of historicist thinking – that in our age and

irrelevant, if not impossible. Submission and adherence to external values, norm conformative self-discipline, the suppression of (inappropriate) sub-conscious desires, drives, impulses and the like are considered “un-natural” (abnormal and in conflict with nature) and therefore harmful to our mental and spiritual well-being.

times we have liberated ourselves from the bondage of outmoded beliefs in the existence of eternal truths, timeless and enduring values and “universally valid” conditions for human life. Nowadays, and especially with the astute insight gathered in the light of a post-modernist critique and active demystification-*cum*-deconstruction of (modern) Western culture, humankind is empowered with the capacity to transcend meaningfully all existing values of the Old Order, thereby becoming freethinking and liberated men and women. With this emancipating “equipment” they have actually progressed beyond the immature frame of mind imposed on them by either the dogmatic determinism of indefensible and worthless articles of the Christian faith, or an obsolete rationalism. Indeed, the obstacles that traditionally frustrated and undermined realistic and convincing interpretations of our world now no longer weigh them down.

This brand new manifestation of historicism is essentially *post-rational* and *post-Christian* in that it maintains to have exposed as worthless and outdated, not only the pretended scientific achievements of rationalism, but essentially also the untenability of the realms of values, norms, principles and the like pertaining to both Christianity and rationalist enlightenment. By exercising its destabilizing and deconstructing powers to their full capacity, it is – even now – tolling the death-knell of *modernity*.

Nonetheless, on closer examination this somewhat naïve and uncritical notion proves illusory. Irrespective of such over-optimistic assumptions, universals are still very much “with us”. They are self-evident and cannot be denied at will and disregarded by design. Indeed, everywhere we find evidence of what Wolters aptly labels “*lawful constancy* in the flux of experience” and of “*invariant principles* amidst a variety of historical events and institutions” (1990: 73; cf. 72ff; the author’s italics, P.S.).

A self-evident, functional and operational *law-order* is in force and determines the relation between a given “order for” phenomena on the one hand, and an “orderliness of” phenomena on the other. This *eternal* and *constant* (universal) *order* is imposed on a totally *dependent* cosmos, thereby guaranteeing its eternal liberty, but then *only* in full compliance with the *constant* (creational) *law*. Therefore, our *fundamental premise* is that literally nothing in our world can lay claim to *autonomy*. Nothing is *absolute*, i.e., a *law unto itself*. No aspect of reality (e.g., the numerical, physical, biotic, psychic, logical, cultural, aesthetic, political, ethical etc.), no human activity (e.g., our scientific ventures, our formative enterprises, our lingual actions, our moral judgments, our religious allegiance etc.), no

societal relationship (e.g., state, church, economic undertaking, educational institution etc.) can elevate itself or be elevated theoretically to the untenable position of being of a higher order than, and therefore superior to the rest.

The important consequence of this fundamental assumption is that all aspects of concrete things, events, etc., all forms of human conduct and all societal relationships are understood as being essentially *relative* and *relational*. Each one is relativized and restricted by the legitimate *spheres of competence* and attendant justified *claims* and *rights* of all others, and therefore exists in a state of *co-ordination* with regard to the remainder. Furthermore, everything in our world possesses a universal structural “principle” that applies to it alone and defines and controls its unique function and role – proper to its distinctive area of competence – in human life. All attempts to subordinate or relativize any one of these (aspects, human enterprises, societal relationships) to others are violations of the right of the former to function alongside the rest with *limited (relative as opposed to absolute) autonomy* within the limitations of their *exclusive* and *differentiated* areas of competence and responsibility (cf. Wolters, 1990: 82; also Walzer’s “spheres of justice”, 1983). The moment absolute status is illegitimately awarded to (or claimed by) any aspect of reality, human enterprise or societal relationship, the end result is some or other form of tyranny with its related structures of domination, coercion and oppression.¹¹

Against the backdrop of what has been claimed above regarding the impossibility of anything in created reality being a law unto itself, we understand that modal aspects and related (modally qualified) societal relationships (e.g., state – juridical, family – ethical, economic enterprise – economic, etc.) are of equal significance and worth, and that they exist in relationships of co-ordination (never “sub-ordination”) to one another. Every modal aspect of reality possesses a proper and unique sphere of “laws” (irreducible to those of the other modal aspects) as a *constant* (universal) *order*. On the other hand, values that relate to the diverse aspects or facets of reality assured by this law-order are *relative, i.e.*, subjected to changes in the stage (and state) of *cultural development* and

11 This has become painfully apparent during the course of history in the forms of *religious intolerance, racism, fascism, nazism/ populism, humanism, materialism* (with its unbridled demand for wealth and on-going prosperity), *scientism* and the like, resulting in the most bizarre and tragic forms of oppression, exploitation and persecution of ordinary and virtually blameless people.

differentiation, as well as the *ethos* (cf. *infra*: 25-27) of a specific community. Men and women opt for them and bring them into play in practical life situations. This “bringing to bear” (effectuation) of principles in practical life situations is carried out presupposing a *normative* (i.e., value-related) freedom of choice. The “putting into effect” of a *universal principle* (“order for”) will be co-regulated by numerous deeper motives, which not only influence and mould the aspirations and choices of emancipated and accountable persons, but even of communities (cf. *infra*: 25-27).

Thus, due to its compliance with certain *universal* requisites for *being a state* (“order for” states) and the effectuation (putting into practice) of this specific *universal* principle, a *state* (body politic) will always be identifiable as such. On the other hand, there are countless instances of fundamentally different *individual concretizations* of the principle that holds for “being a state”. A monarchy is as much a state as is a republic, a democracy as an oligarchy, totalitarian one-party rule as parliamentary government, etc. In the final analysis, and despite their unforgivable indiscretions and felonies, the National-Socialist government of Nazi Germany, the Apartheid regime in South Africa, the Hussein dictatorship in Iraq and the like were *states*, not business enterprises, churches, scientific societies, universities, schools, families or whatever.

The same fundamental rule applies to the “realm” of values. Human actions under the sway of values display a fundamental, situation-bound *relativity*, but then *only* in relation to the *universal structure* of a specific (e.g., ethical, juridical, economic, etc.) value-area. They are applied in divergent practical life situations in either a norm-conformative (obedient) or an anti-normative (disobedient) *direction of concretization*. This matter must be viewed from two different angles. On the one hand it is clear that no human action can ever be so utterly corrupt, so completely decadent that it becomes severed from the *universal order* that applies to values that regulate human activities (cf. also Wolters, 1990: 77-78). An *unjust* deed remains a *juridical* matter, although it involves an anti-normative application or “bringing to bear” of juridical norms; *loveless* behaviour cannot be divorced from its *ethical* basis; *squandering* is an *economically* anti-normative act; the production of *appalling art* remains an *aesthetic* matter; an *illogical* argument is bound to its *logical* starting point, etc. On the other hand, we live in and experience an imperfect reality. Everyone is continually afflicted by baseness, depravity, malice, lack of proper insight and numerous other shortcomings. Bringing to bear values in practical life situations is never untouched by the anti-normative. For this reason no one

can ever claim that his or her actions are in perfect harmony with whatever values or life principles pertain.

We can therefore say that a functional and universally applicable *law order* makes it impossible for anyone to withdraw to a supposedly value-free province: *value relativity* (not relativism) with its emphasis on *contingency* can be conceived only against the backdrop of what is *constant*, namely an *unchanging* (universal) *cosmic law-order*. Thus, moral as well as immoral actions are currently as ethically meaningful as they were during Greek Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment or whatever (demonstrating the possibility of implementations or concretizations of values changing with the passage of time), but then *only* because of their universal and constant *ethical* nature.

Against this background we can infer that –

- the structural “order for” the various normative spheres (in their unbreakable correlation with special and unique aspects of human existence and associated spheres of competence) is a self-evident “given”, a structural order *outside the human mind* that we encounter in our daily experience of value-related matters. This “order for” is *universal* in that it provides a *constant* and *unchanging* “point of departure” for eventual (variable/unpredictable) *value-implementations*.

On the other hand, –

- the “orderly” (*i.e.*, law-conformative) “bringing to bear” (actualization) of universal values in varying life situations – *per se* – can *never* claim any *specified* (*i.e.*, effectuated) universality. The “bringing to bear” (implementation) of values are not only either law-conformative or improper, but – without exception – *contingent, ever changing* and *situation bound* concretizations of a universal “order for”.
- In the final analysis, all value-implementations will be motivated and directed – in terms of the religious antithesis – by either an *anastate* or *apostate Leitmotif*.

It is clear, then, that both the *order for* and the *orderliness of* phenomena are demonstrable features of reality. They exist in close relation and proximity to one another, in the sense that the one presupposes the other. They are totally interdependent sides of the very same reality. To reject (even to relativize) the existence of any one of the two, thereby bestowing incontestable and absolute importance on the other, cancels the possibility of a realistic and accurate explication of reality and therefore also of the values that regulate

human actions. When we deny that the “order for” and the “orderliness of” things are mutually complementary to and supportive of one another and they become – theoretically – torn asunder. They both forfeit their meaning and degenerate into oppressive forces that obscure rather than illuminate, and obstruct rather than emancipate our understanding of reality.

The impending peril of unrestrained relativism can be contested *only* if the inter-connectedness of every temporal thing with the rest is recognized and thoroughly accounted for in our explications of the reality of which we are part. For this reason, the recognition of the *universal* existence of clear-cut and discrete aspects of reality to which certain values are *referential* and in relation to which they possess meaning (cf. Olthuis, 1968: 187) is crucial. Where historicists plead for a denunciation of *universality*, we propose an unqualified *acknowledgment* of the significance thereof in our theoretical reflection on the problem of values. For, indeed, without unwavering (universal) directives, without an “anchor-relation to the law-order” (Olthuis, 1968: 185), perspectives on values and their pivotal role in human conduct will forever fluctuate between the extremities of *casuistry* and *relativism*. The acceptance of the role of both *universality* and *contingency* is – without question – a *sine qua non* for any defensible reflection on the nature and role of values in human life.

5.3 Values: neutral or non-neutral?

Values do not exist in a void. Their deepest meaning is – at all times – moulded and controlled by the most profound motives that impel the actions of individuals, communities and even civilizations. As values and value related matters are, then, forever under the sway of *trans-personal* motives of whatever nature, they are *never neutral*. They are – under all circumstances – *meaningfully specific*. They materialize as Muslim, Hindu, Confucian, Buddhist, Christian, secularized humanist (profane, professedly non- or irreligious)¹² or whatever normativity. Thus, for example, Christians regard the *central commandment of love* for God and neighbour as a *super-arbitrary, trans-subjective* (universal) *principle* that – by virtue of its stabilizing potential – is regulative for all human conduct. Whatever we do, is essentially done in terms of the normative demands placed on us by this all-encompassing and universal value, but always

12 Modern-day secularized humanism – even in its most radical post-modernist manifestation – can never transcend its Christian roots. It will never be totally secular/profane. It is “marked by its experience of Christianity” (Ellul, 1975: 24; cf. also Zuidema, *s.a.*: 14).

within the context of a specific (contingent and ever changing) *historical situation*. The acknowledgment that the *bringing to bear* of a supra-arbitrary principle will occur in conjunction with the unique demands placed on it by a specific historical context (cf. Troost, 1958: 360 ff) does not imply that the *principle* itself is relativized. Only its actual *implementation* (effectuation, concretization) is affected and brought in step with changing times and circumstances.

The ubiquitous nature of values is evidence of an inescapable and undisputable *universality*. Despite historical time and situation, we will always encounter, for instance, ethical (moral), juridical, aesthetic, economic, social, etc. values that pertain to specific normative spheres of our lives. On the other hand, as part of created reality, values – despite their universal incidence – are limited by their essentially non-autonomous status and their inherent relationship with a particular (universal) aspect of reality. The *effectuation* of these values by accountable persons in practical life situations always correlates with *changing times* and *varying situations* and is, therefore, essentially *contingent*. Smit (1985: 8) is justified in pointing out that – where the implementation of values is concerned – there is unquestionably room for *relativity*, but never for *relativism*.

6. Ethos and values

Underlying and partly controlling human premeditation and eventual conduct are inherited dispositions (dominant traits of character, special aptitudes, etc.). But, apart from these, and at a significantly deeper level even than its collective customs and traditions, is the influence of the *Weltanschauung* (world-view) of a community. The latter, itself, is directly controlled by even more profound motivational forces, and amongst them, the human *ethos* (cf. Troost, 1958: 372ff, 1983, 108ff; also Mannheim, 1972: 49-50,51). The ethos emanates from the most profound convictions that are held by individual persons as well as communities (cf. Eby and Arrowood, 1949: 587; Troost, 1958: 372; 1983: 108) regarding the deepest origin of all things, behind which no deeper origin can be meaningfully conceived. As such, the ethos it is a basic motivational force that concentrates all possible motives and desires into one unified force that impels the individual and collective actions of men and women, directing, regulating and “urging them on”¹³ (Troost, 1983: 109). It is the

13 Because of its great latitude and depth, a specific ethos may encompass centuries, groups of nations and, in the case of individual persons, an entire human life (Troost, 1983: 110). One may even speak of the ethos of cultures (like the ethos of Greek

supra-individual and supra-arbitrary starting point of literally every individual as well as collective *value interpretation* (cf. Troost, 1983:110; Mannheim, 1972: 2, 30ff, 49-53; Eby & Arrowood, 1949: 589).

7. Conclusion

The correct and legitimate assumption of historicists regarding the essentially contingent nature of the world we live in undoubtedly laid the foundation for the justifiable and valid rejection of all rationalistic *over-estimation* of “what is universal”. Indeed, authorities like theologians, moral philosophers, politicians, scientists, etc. conveniently misused the *over-estimation* of “universals” to delude ignorant and naive men and women. For this reason, the special significance of a historicist perspective on values and value related issues is undoubtedly its rejection of all forms of *casuistry*. It focuses our attention on the inescapable state of affairs that we live in a complex and ever-changing world where we have to adapt both our *interpretation* and *implementation* of values to meet and satisfy fresh and shifting demands. In its *post-modernist* manifestation, exponents of historicism, therefore, appropriately emphasize the significance of hermeneutics, accentuating the necessity of an unremitting and on-going *re-interpretation* of the nature and status of allegedly “timeless” principles.

Nonetheless, the complete rejection of all forms of universals paves the way for yet another fallacy. By focussing on and over-emphasizing *only* the transient and contingent nature of everything that was formerly accepted as infallible, unerring, everlasting and unchangeable – the source of unwavering values to regulate every life situation – historicists purposefully relativized, destabilized and actively undermined existing convictions (cf. Klapwijk, 1970: 3). In this way they succeeded in plunging modern humanity into a permanent *crisis of certainties* (cf. Zuidema, 1948: 10), the gravity and magnitude of which can hardly be overstated. Stripped of universal “laws for”, and deprived of all “orderliness of” phenomena, all that remains in the wake of historicist reductionism is a chaotic and structureless multiplicity of phenomena in their concrete individuality (cf. Strauss, s.a.: 7). The final question, then, is the following: should *historicism* – and especially its *post-modernist* manifestation – be seen as the epitome of the complete impotence of the

antiquity, of the Middle Ages, of Western civilization, modern secular humanism, a Christian ethos, a Muslim ethos and the like) (cf. Eby & Arrowood, 1949:589).

apostate spirit; of an uncontrollable decline into nihilism and anarchy; of the unpreventable demise of human dignity?

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