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Reconstructing Values in Times of Radical Pluralism

PETER JONKERS

Introduction

One of the most important challenges of contemporary ethics is the wide-spread conviction, particularly in the Western world, that traditional values are nothing but contingent social constructions. Since the sixties of the last century, the processes of individualization, and, more recently, globalization have led to a ‘detraditionalisation’ of the value landscape in the Western world. A growing number of people ‘construct’ their own, individual values by taking various elements from heterogeneous value traditions and reassembling them into new, highly personal constructs. Concrete examples of this new eclecticism are New Age esotericism, and the steep decline of the appeal of many traditional value driven organizations in civil society, such as churches, trade unions, and political parties. Consequently, people consider the legitimacy of the truth claims of established value traditions as completely void or at least as limited in time and place to the group of their respective adherents.

Paradoxically, in spite of the wide-spread conviction that all substantial values are but contingent social constructs, this does not prevent people from being deeply attached to some of them, especially those belonging to their own life-world. One of the most prominent examples of such an attitude is populism, which favours an un-reflective, emotional sympathy for all kinds of popular values in a community of like-minded people. However, from a broader perspective, it is obvious that this emotional and unreflective stance is very worrying, especially in these times of globalization and, hence of radical value pluralism. Therefore, I fully agree with the organizers of this conference that it is timely to argue in favour of a reconstruction of values. However, when such a reconstruction would result in affirming that values are, indeed, social constructs, such an attempt would fall short
of expectations, since it would imply that value traditions would be entitled to withdraw in their own purview, thus blocking the opportunity of interaction, mutual understanding, and enrichment. Hence, what I want to examine in this paper is whether it makes sense to reintroduce the notion of ‘truth’ when it comes to discussing values, and how this notion has to be defined in order to be fruitful in such a discussion.

In order to discuss the relation between the proclaimed contingency of values and the claim to truth, I will examine values and value traditions from an existential point of view. This means that I will treat them not so much as a set of propositions about do’s and don’ts, but as concretizations of the idea of human dignity, and as realized in particular ways of life. Values obviously include all kinds of contingent, i.e. historical and cultural, elements, but they also involve strong personal commitments, which reach far beyond their proclaimed contingency. For example, when educating our children we try to give them the values to which we are strongly attached. Hence, we feel very frustrated if our children ignore them, because we are convinced that living by these values will make their life good and fruitful. Is our deep existential commitment to some substantial values a sufficient reason for saying that they are also true? When using words like a good and fruitful life, do we refer to values that only count for us or also for others, and, eventually may be valuable as such?

In order to examine the question whether there is a relation between substantial values and truth, I will start with presenting a philosophical analysis of the popular idea that values are nothing but social constructs. In the following section, I will then query this view by arguing that, even if one accepts that values comprise many contingent elements, this does not mean at all that it would not make sense to ask for the truth of these values. This insight leads to the idea of existential truth, which I will discuss in the final section.

Values as Contingent Social Constructions

The American philosopher Richard Rorty offers an unsettling analysis of why values are widely being perceived as contingent and how to deal with this in a pragmatic way. He shows that philosophy’s
quest for truth, including the truth of values, has obviously led to nothing; its hope that the objective truth of values could be founded on the so-called natural law, stating that values reflect a natural order, has proven to be in vain. Instead, all values and the narratives underpinning them are but contingent ‘final vocabularies’; their truth can only be demonstrated with circular arguments whose strength does not reach beyond the persons or communities using this vocabulary. In other words, the plausibility of values, let alone their truth, does not reach beyond the confines of a specific culture, which is, by definition, local. Consequently, through lack of a common, neutral meta-vocabulary, people are unable to weigh the truth claims of different value traditions against each other: values, which are essential for Western people, may rather be insignificant for people from other cultures, and vice versa. This explains why a discussion between people of different value traditions ends so often in mis-understanding or in a hostile silence instead of interaction and mutual enrichment. In sum, according to Rorty, we should drop the notion of objective truth altogether, especially when it comes to reconstructing values in global times, and replace it with that of an unforced agreement in a local community. This does not mean that Rorty opts for a kind of relativism, according to which every value would be as good as any other or that ‘true’ would be an equivocal term. It does imply “the ethnocentric view that there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society – ours – uses in one or another area of inquiry.”

In our global times, the almost daily confrontation with very diverging value traditions often causes people to take an attitude of irony with regard to all these ‘final vocabularies’: ironists are “never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and

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thus of their selves.”

They put this into practice by continually redescribing themselves, society, and the world in ever new ways, by constantly recreating themselves without referring to any normative eternal examples, like God, reason, truth, natural law, etc. Consequently, the ironist dismisses any reasonable discussion between different value traditions as a waste of time.

However, according to Rorty, the ironist is a pathological figure, since he is constantly in doubt as to whether he has been raised in the ‘wrong’ language-game, and inclined to give up his vocabulary in favour of another. Because all vocabularies are equally contingent, there is no end to this search, so that the ironist never finds peace in any of them. Consequently, he runs the risk of not belonging to anything anymore, of completely losing his identity. He can only avoid this risk by devoting himself to the vocabulary with which he is familiar. Consequently, he simply declares that there are limits to what he can take seriously. In sum, we are fully entitled to be emotionally attached to a specific value tradition, although reasonably we know that it is completely contingent.

In my view, Rorty’s analysis is exemplary for what is happening in many Western countries with regard to values and their truth claims. He explains why people are afraid of losing the values to which they are attached, especially when confronted with a plurality of alternatives, all of which seem equally attractive, but also equally contingent. In order to deal with the unsettling consequences of this radical value pluralism, they unreflectively affirm the values with which they are most familiar, not so much on reasonable, but on emotional grounds.

In an article entitled “Apologia of the Coincidental,” the German philosopher Odo Marquard offers a similar analysis of the current radical value pluralism in the Western world. Like Rorty, he shows that substantiating the truth claims of value traditions on the basis of natural law, as well as trying to reach consensus over them in a pluralist context have failed in the face of human finiteness. This has led to a widespread suspicion with regard to the truth claims of all values,

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and to the conviction that all values can be transvaluated (Nietzsche). “Everything that cannot (by a consensus, resulting from a non-oppressive discourse) be demonstrated as being absolutely good, could for that reason be evil (including all the orientations at our disposal for acting). Therefore it should be treated as if it were really evil, until it is (by absolute discourse) consensually justified as something good. As long as this is not the case, all acting that is guided by conventions has to be suspended and even treated as suspicious.”

A concrete example of this strategy are the endless discussions among youth about the basic principles of a new, just society during the sixties and seventies of the last century. In their eagerness to set up a new, non-oppressive society, they started by rejecting all conventions and value traditions, because they were not rationally justified and were oppressive. They were convinced that, through a consensus resulting from non-oppressive discourse, they could lay the foundations of a new society that could meet the criteria of rational justification. Meanwhile, they expected that the affluent society they were actually living in would enable them to refrain from real life as long as their discussions about the ins and outs of the new, rational society had not yet reached the desired general consensus. In fact, this methodic suspicion of conventional values results in a kind of philosophy which refuses what is given, what has been handed down through the ages, i.e. value traditions, because of their contingency. It eventually comes down to a refusal of every value tradition as long as it is not rationally justified: as long as a particular, contingent way of life has not proven itself rationally justified, the best option is to refrain from living at all. Of course, this conclusion is absurd, since it is in fact a ban on starting to live before life has come to an end.

Marquard’s critique of the modern idea that it would be possible to reach reasonable consensus over conflicting values in a pluralist society comes down to the idea that this approach makes use of an abstract idea of rationality and human society: it presupposes that humans are intellects, freely floating in a neutral space, and that new

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value traditions can be developed from scratch, accepting only what has passed the test of rational foundation or justification. In doing so, it abstracts from the fact that human rationality is always embodied in concrete lives.

Thus, we seem to find ourselves in a deadlock with regard to answering the question of how to reconstruct values in global times. The ideal of modern philosophy, aiming at a complete rational justification of the truth of these values through natural law or consensus, has proven unattainable. Human life is simply too short to wait for conclusive answers which remove all doubt concerning the truth of our value orientations. The pursuit of this ideal of complete rational justification and truth leads to a philosophy of life after death, thus leaving the vital questions of life before death unanswered. What we really need is a philosophical reflection on life before death. Only with the help of this type of reflection may we be able to understand why certain values should be reconstructed, whereas others have rightfully become obsolete.

Marquard’s position is similar to Rorty’s also as regards the solution of this deadlock: although traditions are contingent, we simply cannot live without them. Marquard is able to explain far better than Rorty why the ironist’s practice of hopping from one vocabulary to another makes him insane. He calls traditions expressions of fate-contingency, and distinguishes them clearly from arbitrary-contingency. Arbitrary-contingency can be described as something that could have been otherwise, and can be changed by us (e.g. the contingent choice between cheese or ham as sandwich filling). Rorty’s ironic ‘tradition-hopper’ is a clear example of this arbitrary-contingency; he thinks he can arbitrarily redescribe his own life and the world he is living in. Fate-contingency, on the other hand, is something that could have been otherwise, but cannot be changed by us (e.g. the fact that we were born in a certain time and place, that we speak our native language). In fact, fate-contingency prevails in determining our lives, since it confronts us with the strength of natural and historical particulars. From this perspective, the self-important presumptuousness

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with which we make our plans or take decisions often makes us look ridiculous. Most value traditions, like all other kinds of final vocabularies, obviously belong to fate-contingency, since they determine us far more than we determine them. We humans are much more our own fate-contingencies than our own choices.\(^6\) In sum, in Marquard’s view, although value traditions are contingent, this is no reason for not being attached to them; on the contrary, life would be impossible without them.

The Paradox of Substantial Attachments to Contingent Traditions

In the previous section, I have shown that various contemporary philosophers explicitly recognize the importance of value traditions, either because there is a limit to the value traditions that we can take seriously (Rorty), or because they are simply part of our human condition (Marquard). This explicitly proclaimed attachment to values does not prevent them from being contingent. This contingency concerns both the personal, historical, and cultural backgrounds of our attachment to these value traditions, as well as their content. According to these authors, our substantial attachment to a way of life have no implication as to its truth. It is only determined by psychological and cultural factors, and thus basically a matter of time and place. This implies that, if it makes sense at all to claim its truth, this claim does not reach any further than the people who are already committed to this or that (religious) way of life, and, thus, convinced of its truth. However important it is for the already converted to clarify and meditate these truths, there is no generally accepted concept of rationality or a neutral meta-vocabulary which could serve as a kind of judicial authority (to use a famous expression of Kant’s) for weighing the truth claims of diverging values. Thus, humans seem to be substantially committed to a given tradition, to which they belong only contingently, and which, as such, is also contingent. This result leaves still unanswered, the leading question of this paper, namely how to reconstruct values in times of radical pluralism, especially when this

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reconstruction aims at more than just affirming that value traditions are social constructions.

After having analyzed some underlying problems with regard to the reconstruction of values in times of radical pluralism, the remainder of this paper, will try to give a positive answer to this question. Admittedly, we often experience that many of our substantial attachments concern contingent matters. Most of our daily habits, from the kind of food we prefer to our morning or evening rituals, belong to this category. We usually perform them unconsciously, and we only realize the substantial character of our attachment to them when we have to forego them for some time. This is one of the reasons why people are usually glad to return home from their holidays abroad. The contingent content of some of our substantial attachments becomes even clearer when we look at our attachment to our native language. As the word ‘native’ already indicates, it is the language we are most familiar with in the sense that it enables us to express and share our deepest thoughts and emotions. We experience the substantial character of this attachment most clearly when we are abroad and want to communicate with others on a deeper level than sharing the usual ‘airport information’. In such situations, we always feel somewhat hampered, because we often cannot find the right words to express our thoughts and feelings, or understand the exact meaning and connotation of the words of our conversation partners. Immigrants and people belonging to a linguistic minority are also painfully aware of this handicap in everyday life, and of the social and economic discrimination resulting therefrom. On the other hand, however, our native language is something contingent, since it depends upon the contingency of the language of our parents; it is a mother tongue. In sum, a native language is characteristic of what Marquard calls fate-contingency: although it is completely contingent, our native language determines our symbolic access to the world and to other people, whereas we cannot determine it. Nobody can choose his or her native language.

When reflecting upon our substantial attachments, most people realize that many of them concern all kinds of contingent matters. Therefore, nobody seriously wants to lay claim to their truth. Although we are attached to our native language in a substantial way, this does not mean at all that it is more ‘true’ or superior in comparison
to other languages. On the contrary, all attempts to upgrade our sub-
stantial attachment in such a way lead to oppressing those who have
other substantial attachments. Heidegger’s conviction that German is,
after ancient Greek, the best language to speak about philosophical
issues, shows the problematic character of his attachment to his native
language, especially if one looks at his political positions during the
Nazi period. Moreover, it is an insult to all non-German philosophers.
The same can be said about the ancient Greeks, who underscored their
pretension to ‘linguistic superiority’ by calling foreigners barbarians,
thereby disqualifying the language of these foreigners as jabber. These
examples clearly show how essential it is to realize that the objects of
many of our substantial attachments are contingent, and have to re-
main so. It prevents us from imposing them on others, since this
would imply an illegitimate violation of their personal or cultural in-
tegrity. Especially in global times, being aware of the contingency of
many of our attachment is crucial for being able to live together peace-
fully.

The question is whether this reasoning holds true for our attach-
ment to all substantial values and value traditions. Are they as con-
tingent as our daily habits and native language, implying that it makes
no sense to speak about their truth? Are people, in expressing the truth
of the values to which they are attached, simply expressing their pri-
ivate feelings or those of the community, to which they happen to
belong, or are they, by contrast, saying that these values are really
true? If so, are they justified to impose their values on other people, or
would they then become guilty of oppression and tyranny? As we
know, history is full of tragic examples of imposing specific values on
other people, especially during the times of colonization.

Although nobody can seriously want to return to the cultural
colonialism of the previous centuries, the issue of value contingency
versus truth is still, or perhaps again, very relevant because of the
important shifts in contemporary society. The crucial question in this
respect is: Is an individual able to perform the ‘mental acrobatics’
necessary for being substantially committed in the private domain to
certain values, while, at the same time, recognizing their sheer con-
tingency in the public domain?
In order to clarify this crucial point, note this concrete example of conflicting values in global times. Insofar as being a European citizen stands for the substantial attachment to a value tradition, which comes down to respecting the inviolability of the physical and spiritual integrity of the person, or, more generally speaking, the dignity of the human person.\(^7\) Again, both the origins and the content of this value tradition and our commitment to it contain many contingent aspects. When confronted with people who reject this value or even attack it, many Europeans experience that not only is their attachment to them substantial, but that their basic content is also true, and hence deserves to be defended publicly. They do not experience the substantial content of their European values as just one of the many final vocabularies, but as an interpretation of what it truly means to be human and what a just society should be. Although history shows that the origin of this value tradition was contingent, and although it needs constant refinement and adaptation in a globalised world, it is nevertheless an expression of how the relations between persons as well as between states and their citizens should truly be.

In contexts of private and public values, we use words like ‘true’ and ‘universal’ in order to express something essential, something that is not just true for the individual who expresses it or for a small group of like-minded people. In order to make this concrete, we communicate our substantial commitments with others in the public domain, asking others to recognize them as an expression of something essential. In other words, we ask them to recognize the values that underpin these commitments as truthful orientations for our lives. This striving for recognition does not mean that others have to adopt our values for the orientation of their lives. This would be a denial of the inevitable dissemination of people’s lives, and consequently of the real divergence of our substantial commitments as they are embodied in the contingency of our concrete existence as finite human beings. It is an illusion to expect that this real divergence of substantial commitments can eventually be superseded by a peaceful dialogue between all value traditions or by waiting for their eschatological fusion. On

\(^7\) See Hans Joas, *Die Sakralität der Person* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2012).
the contrary, the striving for recognition of the truth of diverging value traditions often appears as a painful confrontation of irreconcilable practices. Nevertheless, the process of striving for recognition shows that there is something essential at stake: others ask us to recognize that their substantial commitment to their value tradition is an attempt to express something essential and of equal value to our own substantial commitments, although we may not share their commitments and they may even fill us with repulsion. The process of recognition can only take place against the background of conflicting substantial values, because only then can all partners in this process become aware of the fact that there is something essential at stake. Therefore, we feel deeply frustrated when others do not want to take these meanings seriously, and reduce them to contingent, private opinions whose acceptance does not rest upon their substance, but merely upon their private character, and on their not causing too much of a fuss.

What matters here is not so much the actual process of recognition and its social and political implications, but the fact that, while striving for recognition, we reach out towards something essential, towards an existential truth which transcends our subjective, contingent self. In the end, we do not want to be left alone with our contingent convictions and practices, nor are we prepared to leave others alone with theirs. We humans are too finite to be left alone with our own finitude, too dependent on the recognition of our substantial meanings by others to seriously consider ourselves as the only creators of truth and value in a meaningless world. This implies that the above mentioned ‘mental acrobatics’ that is required to be a full member of the (post) modern circus of life-styles, bidding for the public’s favour, falls short of expectations. We cannot live with the idea that all our private substantial attachments, without which life would be impossible, are, in the public domain, completely contingent.

Value Reasoning

What does the foregoing tell us about the truth of values? As said, answering this question is a necessary condition for engaging in a process of value reconstruction in global times. First of all, it has
become clear that the kind of truth that value traditions claim, differs from the truth claims of the sciences and theoretical philosophy. Rather, in order to discover the truth of values, philosophy has to start from the lives of people who live by these values, and accept that value traditions are expressions of practical wisdom and have to be examined accordingly. That is why I prefer the term ‘existential’ to ‘theoretical truth’ in the context of values and other expressions of practical wisdom. In other words, what is needed for a reconstruction of values is in the first place a hermeneutics of specific value traditions.

A concrete example of this hermeneutics is cultural value reasoning. This approach stems from the tradition of interreligious dialogue, which, under the name of ‘scriptural reasoning’, is aimed at interpreting religious convictions and practices. First of all, all participants engaged in cultural value reasoning have to acknowledge the sacred character of the others’ values to them (without having to acknowledge their authority for oneself). They have as well to recognize that they do not exclusively ‘own’ the values of their cultural tradition, which means that they are not the only experts on its final meaning. By taking this approach, cultural value reasoning aims at stimulating a self-reflective attitude among the people who participate in such a dialogue, without requiring them to give up the sacred character of their values to them.

Cultural value reasoning starts with recognizing that value traditions result from long chains of reasoning about the good life. Value reasoning prevents these values from being reduced to contingent social constructions. In order to show whether the truth claims of these value traditions are justified they have to be made public, so that they can be understood by people from other traditions. Value reasoning fulfils this task by bringing together the views of the good life, their

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9 Ford, Christian Wisdom, pp. 279f. See also Adams, Habermas and Theology, p. 243.
interpretation by philosophical reasoning, and ‘public issue’ questions. In other words, value reasoning stimulates that cultural traditions become self-reflective: in particular, its members have to acknowledge the sacredness of the others’ values to them, but without having to acknowledge their authority for oneself. When people enter the hermeneutical circle of the public debate and, by doing so, become self-reflective, they learn to accept the idea that the values of others express a kind wisdom that can be interpreted philosophically, and, hence, offers food for thought to all participants in the public debate, even though they may not share or even reject these values. Hence, this philosophical interpretation of the wisdom that is embedded in value traditions creates a shared field for people from different cultures. Given the heterogeneous character of value traditions, value reasoning is polyphonic, which implies that it is not aimed at reaching consensus. It even less can be reduced to an authoritarian monologue of one value system, distorting all the others.

The above shows that value reasoning mediates between divergent value traditions. It realizes this aim by making deep value reasonings public so that others may learn to understand them and discover why particular trains of reasoning are reasonings, and not just particular assumptions, contingent social constructions, and why they are attractive or problematic. In other words, value reasoning stimulates value traditions to become self-reflective, so that they can situate themselves against a broader cultural background, and can be recognized by people who do not belong to this specific tradition, but without requiring them to accept any claim for exclusive recognition.

Hence, value reasoning is able to understand the values that are foundational for a culture in their own right. It is aimed at establishing a self-reflective, hermeneutical field that is shared by various value traditions. This shared field is the result of the common need for existential orientation, to which all value traditions are trying to respond. In this context, it is also important to note that the shared field, at which value reasoning aims by making the reasonings of different value systems public, is not identical with striving after consensus.

10 Adams, Habermas and Theology, p. 242; see also Ford, Christian Wisdom, p. 281.
Rather, the best result that can be reached is friendship, that is, the recognition of the sacred nature of each other’s values and a shared desire to study them.

How, then, can value reasoning realize the recognition of the sacred character of fundamental values, while avoiding that this recognition becomes exclusive? The answer is that it only coordinates discussions between members of different value traditions without requiring a commitment to a specific culture and a specific interpretation of human rights, which often turns out to be a Western, individualist one. Participants engage in value reasoning only as members of a particular value tradition. By so doing, they also recognize that their specific value system does not completely exhaust the very idea of human dignity, which underlies each value system. Because this recognition counts for all specific value systems, none of them can claim to have a monopoly. Moreover, value reasoning prepares a shared playing field, which means that the members of value traditions accept the claim that the other belongs there too, without stating further conditions as to the nature of their reasonings. This explains why value reasoning is aimed at friendship, resulting from respectfully studying religious traditions, rather than at consensus on specific issues. A final reason why value reasoning may offer a solution to the problem of value conflicts in a context of radical cultural diversity is that it does not make a strong contrast between argumentation and narrative. Because value reasoning brings together the interpretation of values, the practices of philosophical and theological reasoning, and ‘public issue’ questions, there is argumentation at every stage. This is so because, again, value reasoning is an expression of practical wisdom, and is practiced in a shared, not in a neutral, space. In other words, through its origin in wisdom, value reasoning manifests a broader kind of reasonableness than modern, procedural reason, and is therefore able to include both argumentation and narration.

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