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What is the worth of European values?

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My first words will be, as they should, words of most heartfelt thanks for the honor bestowed upon me. I have to thank again because this prize gave me the opportunity of reading — for the first time, I blushingly confess — Mme de Staël's masterpiece, *De l'Allemagne*. In this work, I learnt that the capital city of Germany is none other than... Vienna¹. I am all the more pained to have to speak an English of sorts. But I know full well the reasons for the choice of this language.

In this city that used to be the capital of a decidedly multicultural state and, as such, an image of Europe on a smaller scale, I feel I have to muse on Europe. When I am in a gloomy mood, which happens from time to time, I wonder whether it would not have made more sense for me to spare the time I spent writing on European cultural identity and later, doing research on related issues. I could have devoted this time to other intellectual pursuits. Among the first objects of a possible study that spring to my mind are languages of the ancient Middle East such as Egyptian or Akkadian. The beauty of the cultures that expressed themselves in those languages is that there is no doubt about their being dead as doornails. Whether European culture is still alive is a moot question. It sometimes gives the impression that it is some sort of zombie, a corpse that keeps walking. In 1992, my fellow-countryman Jacques Delors, then president of the European Commission, said that we should give back Europe a soul². Much people translate this plea into the vocabulary of "values".

A prize for European cultural values prompts me to give a bit of thought to the very idea of a value and of what a value is all about. I certainly won't plead against European values. Heaven forbid that I should even think of doing that. But I would advocate some more caution in our preaching on their behalf, more precisely on our calling them by the name of values.

¹ Mme de Staël, *De l'Allemagne* [1813], I, 9, Paris, Garnier, s.d., p. 54.

² J. Delors, Speech of February, 6th, 1992.

Describing what European values are would not give us much mileage and praising them here would amount to bringing coal to Newcastle. Things like the rule of law, fair opportunities for everybody, male or female, freedom, and in particular freedom of scientific research, are commonly agreed upon, at least in European countries. Whether they are actually enforced is another kettle of fish. What is important is the kind of behavior that the care for such values induces, or should induce, in the European mind. Concrete respect for the freedom of other people, and a law-abiding behavior are more important than principles.

On the other hand, we should ask why all those good things, those things the goodness of which can hardly be gainsaid, receive the name of “values”, a word that might be not that harmless, not as much anyway as is commonly assumed. Let us perform what film makers call a “dollying out” and move the camera backwards. Let us ask how the kind of behavior that answers the call of values was understood in the past. Not just any past state of civilization, but the past that gave birth to European culture.

It is a matter of common knowledge that the sources of European culture are to be found in classical Antiquity and in the Bible. To use a rather hackneyed catch-word, they arose in “Athens” as well as in “Jerusalem”.

Now, those two sources agreed for the most part on the content of what is right and what is wrong. But they interpreted what is good or evil in different ways.

Let us choose as spokesmen for the “Athenian” outlook the philosophers, Greek or Roman. All call what prompts us to do good “virtues”. Now, the Greek word for “virtue”, ἀρετή, can designate the excellence of just any kind of being, not only human beings. For instance, it made sense for the Greeks to speak of the “virtue” of a horse, i.e. its swiftness in running. Plato’s Socrates begins with asking what the virtue of a horse is and then shifts to the trickier case of human virtues³. Our European languages kept this meaning till a relatively recent time, when they spoke of the curative virtue of a plant or of a gem. Running is a natural property of the horse; its ability to run faster than other ones is the peak of this natural endowment. Virtues are grounded on the nature of things. For us human beings, “doing good” means that we bring

³ Plato, Republic, I, 335b8.

what in us is human, what constitutes the deepest core of our humanity, to fulfillment. We do that by bringing out what most decidedly expresses what kind of beings we are, i.e. rational beings, for rationality is our nature.

The Hebrew Bible doesn't possess a word for nature, although the idea can undergird many narratives⁴. The actions that it praises are very much the same as what the Greeks deemed praiseworthy. But it calls them by another name, i.e. "commandments". In the Bible rulings that enable justice and charity are issued by a transcendent Being whom biblical writers call by the name of God. This god reveals himself in the course of history and as the one who shapes history. This God issued orders as clauses of a covenant with mankind at large, and later on with Israel. "Doing good and avoiding evil" means that one abides by God's commandments. In present-day Jewish parlance, any good deed is still commonly called a *mitzvah*, i.e. literally a "commandment". Human perfection is lawfulness as listening to God's voice.

We modern people prefer to speak of values. Now, this can be understood as a means to steer a middle course between the Ancient and the Biblical outlooks. I would rather say that this is a way of playing the one against the other. Modern thought as a whole often tries to get rid of both world-views by using the one as a weapon against the other, criticizing paganism with biblical tools and the Bible with ancient, pagan intellectual implements⁵. The question that remains is whether this synthesis is stable, hence, long-lived, rather than the fly of one day.

The notion of "values" borrows some elements from both pre-modern sources of our culture.

From the Biblical view, they get some dimension of transcendence. Values are above us, they are the target of our striving, what we are driving at, perhaps as a goal that can't be reached, but is the object of an indefinite yearning or, to speak like the German philosopher Fichte, a "striving" (*Streben*)⁶.

From the ancient, classical, "pagan" if we want, outlook, values borrow their immanent dimension. They are not divine in origin, but human.

⁴ See my *On the God of the Christians and one or two others*, tr. P. Seaton, South Bend: Saint Augustine's Press 2013, p. 124.

⁵ See P. Manent, *La Cité de l'homme*, Paris: Fayard, 1994, pp. 41, 50, 71, 288 *et passim*. English translation,

⁶ Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* [1794], III, §5, II, ed. F. Medicus, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1962, t. 1, p. 454.

In both cases, however, the modern outlook turns against its sources. It does that as for the ground of moral obligation. Over against the Bible, it rejects the grounding of the good on God's will and wisdom. And over against classical Greek and Roman philosophy, it rejects its grounding on any natural properties of beings. The English philosopher G.E.R. Moore has pushed this dismissal of any grounding to its logical consequences in his critique of what he calls the "naturalistic fallacy"⁷.

The only available ground for action must be our freedom. We are supposed to be free, autonomous beings that need not be driven to action by any external principle, including this paradoxical inside outsider which we call our nature. Modern man is supposed neither to hearken to any divine being over above him, nor to have any nature, but to decide freely of what he/she will do, and even what he/she will be.

Now, our "values" are as transcendent as Moses' Tables, but their transcendence is turned upside down. They don't come from above, from Sinai or from Heavens, but from underneath. They are not handed over to us by some active power; we are the agents. But are we really? Are values human? For they might even be sub-human. I pointed out above that Ancient thought saw in human excellence an example of a wider principle that holds good for any living being. In a way that resembles it, modern thought since Thomas Hobbes sees in decency hardly more than the result of a desire for preservation that is to be found in any living being. And later thinkers, in the wake of Darwin, interpret it as the result of a process of natural selection that makes us prefer what enhances the life of the species. This comes to a head in the late modern doctrine of value, put forward with great clarity by Nietzsche: values are set by the will to power as the conditions of possibility of its unfolding⁸.

The present day European cast of mind is very much influenced by this view of what makes a value what it is. Hence the idea that some values are "our" values. Behind this possessive pronoun, that sounds merely descriptive and therefore quite harmless at first blush, lies in hiding a whole view of the origin

⁷ G.E.R. Moore, *Principia ethica* [1903].

⁸ Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, I, §3; KSA, t. 5, p. 17; Fragment 7 [38], Autumn 1887, t. 12, p. 352; 11 [73], November 1887-March 1888, p. 36.

of our moral evaluations. In particular, “European values” could boil down to be what ensures the perpetuation of a European way of life.

But what if this way of life, together with the values that make it possible, should prove to be scarcely more than folklore? Scottish gentlemen wear filibegs, others don’t; French people eat frogs, others don’t; Europeans as a whole respect women, others don’t, etc.

What do we need for Europe to go on taking itself seriously, together with what it stands for? How can we responsibly propose this to the rest of the world without indulging in cultural imperialism?

My hunch is that we should, to begin with, say good-bye to the idea of values. It goes without saying that we should keep as a precious treasure the *content* of the so-called “values”. But we should free them from the suspicion of being hardly more than the folklore of the white man.

In order to do that, we need to come back to the two pre-modern notions mentioned above, i.e. virtues and commandments. Instead of playing the ones against the others, we should attempt a synthesis that would let them foster each other. As a matter of fact, this synthesis existed in the Middle Ages in the three religions. Let us think of some examples: st. Ambrosius, in the late 4th Century, simply cribbed Cicero’s *De Officiis*. In the 13th Century, Aquinas integrated the Ancient moral doctrines into the part of his *Summa Theologica* that deals with the virtues, and Roger Bacon quoted large batches of Seneca in his *Moralis Philosophia*. Let us mention, too, similar attempts in the Islamic world, like the whole tradition of the treatises on the refinement of the mores (*tahdīb al-ahlāq*) by Miskawayh and other people, not to forget, in the Jewish communities, Maimonides’ “Eight Chapters”.

For us, this supposes a double effort to rethink both what virtues and what commandments are all about.

On the one hand, we should endeavor to understand that virtues are the flourishing of the human as such, regardless of the diversity of cultures and religions, which implies acknowledging something like a human nature.

On the other hand, we should get rid of the representation of God’s commandments as “heteronomy”. To put it in simpler terms, avoiding any word of art, those commandments are not the whims of a tyrant, foisted upon a fold of slaves. All the biblical commandments stem from a first basic and utterly simple commandment, namely “be!”, “be what you are!” The “become

who you are” had not to wait for Pindar, let alone for Nietzsche. Whatever sounds like a legal ruling in the Bible is the small change of creation or, if you prefer, its refraction in different media that unfold the abilities implied therein⁹.

In the present day, European mankind is badly in need of this double rediscovery and recovery: on the one hand of the virtues as being good for each and every human being, and on the other hand, of obedience to the commandment to be, and to be what it is. May it understand this necessity and this urgency.

⁹ See my *Le Propre de l’homme. Sur une légitimité menacée*, Paris: Flammarion, 2014, ch. IX, p. 219-244. An English translation by P. Seaton, under the title of *The Legitimacy of the Human*, is due to appear in South Bend. (Ind.), Saint Augustine’s Press.