A PHILOSOPHICAL MANIFESTO

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Abstract: this text presents a metaphysical outline, followed by a proposal for ethics. The metaphysical outlook is meant to be compatible with contemporary science, and the ethical doctrine is basically pragmatic and utilitarian. The general point of view is also largely inspired by classical Chinese thought, contrasted with traditional Western dogma. We hope in this way to be able to renew our common conceptions of morality.

Keywords: philosophy, metaphysics, ethics, pragmatism, utilitarianism, contemporary science, Chinese culture.

Résumé: ce texte propose un aperçu métaphysique, suivi par une doctrine éthique. Cette métaphysique se veut compatible avec la science contemporaine, et l'éthique est essentiellement pragmatique et utilitaire. Le point de vue est aussi largement inspiré de la pensée chinoise classique, opposée aux dogmes occidentaux usuels. Nous espérons ainsi arriver à renouveler les conceptions les plus courantes de la morale occidentale.

Mots-clés: philosophie, métaphysique, éthique, pragmatisme, utilitarisme, science contemporaine, culture chinoise.

Foreword

This small treatise will follow a classical pattern: a metaphysical outline, followed by a proposal for ethics. The ethical motivation is perhaps the stronger one, but will first rely on a general view of the world, if only because ethical issues are highly debatable and hotly debated, so that they had better be grounded first in a larger point of view.

Does it still make sense to write about metaphysics? The general consensus nowadays seems to be that metaphysics belongs to a former age and is now out of date. The positivist attitude associated with science permeates today's culture, shunning any idle speculation. Trying to reason abstractly about the nature of the universe would be a hopeless task, and investigating the world would be best left to scientific research, with its experimental method and formal models. Yet metaphysical questions about the form of the universe and mankind's place within it are still with us, and hard to give up completely, as science has not really answered many of them and possibly never will, because these are not really scientific questions.

Nevertheless, contemporary physics often deal with theoretical issues that are suspiciously close to traditional metaphysical questions about space and time, determinism and randomness, analysis and holism, and so on. The best scientists are in fact very much interested in philosophical questions (and often quite knowledgeable about the history of philosophy), as they cannot fail to realize how entwined advanced science can still be with classical philosophical issues. So metaphysical questions often creep up (more or less rephrased) in scientific theories (in cosmology notably), although science fails to tackle such questions squarely because it has different goals and methods.

It has been argued that metaphysical questions are impossible to answer properly because they are badly formulated in the first place. It might be meaningless for instance to talk about the universe as a whole, because no experimental procedure could deal with statements of this kind, which would then be unverifiable (this could also be said of contemporary cosmological theories!). Yet the questions are still there, as pressing as ever, and we should at least try to formulate them as best as we can, so as to come up with tentative but reasonable answers.

And this short text will not just be another outdated attempt at classical metaphysics. We agree with most modern philosophers since Kant that we cannot really fathom the fundamental nature of the world beyond a certain point because

we are hopelessly constrained both by limited experience and by cognitive limitations. We should entrust modern experimental science with the task of probing the functioning of the world, and give up on the idea that we could establish anything definitive by abstract reasoning only. But we may still endeavor to gather as many strands as possible of contemporary knowledge to see if we can propose a general outline of the main features of our world, in the most coherent manner possible.

Contrary to classical philosophy, we often won't even bother to try to prove or demonstrate some of our assertions. In many cases we do not really believe they could be proven convincingly, and they might well be wrong or invalidated later by the progress of scientific research. We just want to try to be consistent and compatible with contemporary science (i.e. from the middle of the 19th century onward), to the best of our knowledge (in a way, this text can be seen as a digest of today's scientific outlook). Our main goal is to put together a reasonably clear and coherent picture of the world as we can envision today, in agreement with established scientific doctrine, and to use this picture as a starting point for a pragmatic conception of ethics.

The knowledgeable reader will notice two major influences on this text: the philosophy of Spinoza and traditional Chinese thought (including Chinese Buddhism). There is indeed some similarity (probably fortuitous) between these two systems of thought. The impersonal conception of divinity, the lack of transcendence, the absence of creation, a naturalistic conception of ethics are common to Spinoza and to China, although there are also important differences. For example, Spinoza's trust in the power of abstract thought and logical reasoning is totally alien to Chinese culture. Please see the addendum at the end for an outline of the Chinese worldview (one may want to read it first).

I would have happily remained a humble follower of Spinoza, but his complete determinism (a central feature of his philosophy and ethics) is no longer compatible with contemporary science. And in spite of its depth and subtlety, traditional Chinese thought was mostly inimical to the analytical spirit of classical European science, although it appears strangely congenial to contemporary science. Philosophy cannot be accepted nowadays if it doesn't prove compatible with science, and most philosophers have indeed tried to take into account the science of their day. So I would be glad to succeed to some extent in updating Spinoza and blending Chinese thought with contemporary science.

Anyway, it would be informative to see how far one can go in this direction, and what would remain to be done. Last but not least, let's just hope this text will prove a source of intellectual pleasure for the reader as writing it has been for the author.

METAPHYSICAL AND ETHICAL OUTLINE

This world is all there is

The universe or rather the world as we know it (imperfectly and subject to regular revision) is our only source of information and rational modes of reasoning. We can tentatively advance statements about the whole universe based on our limited experience with parts of the world (in space and time). But we cannot safely conclude from this experience as to anything that would lie beyond this world. This would be a matter for imagination, not for knowledge.

It follows from the preceding statement that we cannot and should not discuss anything beyond the world as we know it. There might well be something out there (although the question what "out there" could really mean is just mind-boggling), but it would be totally beyond our grasp. Of course, we can and will revise from time to time our conception of the universe (if only because there is still so much that we don't know or don't understand), but our knowledge will always be about this world and nothing else. So we will mostly speak here about our world rather than about the universe as a whole.

There is no transcendence

There is then no transcendence, i.e. nothing beyond or behind or outside the ordinary world as we know it. There is no God or gods (personal or otherwise), no creator and no creation, as this world is all we know and can reasonably hope to know. Human psychology and social structure might incline us to harbor strong religious feelings about some kind of divinity, but feelings are not a valid form of knowledge, however strong they may be.

The long-lasting need (at least in the West) to believe in a personal God that deeply cares for mankind is nothing but a childish yearning for security and protection. Children's feelings of dependence upon their parents have been projected unto an imaginary, father-like divine figure supposed to protect believers (the stirring language used in the biblical psalms is particularly telling in this respect). Popular religious attitudes derive from a basic human need for security, but tell us very little about the actual world.

Of course, there are also other motivations for religion to explain its grip on so many people. Social bonding thanks to shared beliefs and rituals, moral codes justified by a transcendent authority, a global explanation of the universe and our place within it, the sense given to our life in this world are certainly powerful incentives. But the need for psychological security is probably the paramount reason, overcoming any incoherence and deficiencies in religious beliefs. Note, however, that Far-Eastern cultures have endured and prospered for thousands of years without believing in a personal God.

We can still feel religious awe

As we are probably built this way and because it has been part of human culture for thousands of years, we may still feel awe and respect for the immensity, power and intricacy of the universe. There is nothing wrong in giving way to such deep-seated religious feelings, which have been a major source of inspiration for the best works of art and literature. The quest for the absolute and mystical experience are undeniable components of human psychology and culture and are certainly worthy of consideration. A feeling of awe toward the universe is also a good protection against the arrogance that comes too often with our technical and industrial civilization. Being reminded of our insignificance is a good idea indeed.

We should not, however, draw conclusions from mere feelings and use them to justify any moral or social rules. We have no right to use our religious feelings, however powerful they might be, to make decisions about moral questions and social organization. Social rules are a matter for rational discussion, not for moral exhortations. Passionate moralizing may be socially useful (or harmful as the case may be) but lacks any intellectual validity. Religion and rationality belong to different domains, which should not be mixed if we want to keep our ideas clear.

The universe is (probably) eternal and infinite

Whether the universe has a beginning or an end is a fascinating question, which is perhaps ill-defined because it quickly leads to paradoxes (Kant's "antinomies") and further questions. Supposing that there was a beginning to the universe (the Big Bang for example), it begs the question of what there could be before the beginning. If time exists independently of physical events (as a framework for them), there was surely a time before the beginning? Or maybe time is just a formulation of the passage of events (a measure of their succession), so there could not be time before the beginning of the universe? Or, strange to say, could there be another kind of time before time? And supposing there will be an end to the

universe, could something be envisioned after this end? Or would time stop with this universe? Could time itself have a beginning or an end?

The same type of questioning can be applied to space, with similar difficulties. Is space essential or relational? If the universe is finite, the question naturally arises whether there might be something beyond the bounds of the universe, which might then prove to be infinite. But does it make sense to ask this question in the first place? Does space exist independently of the matter within it, or is simply a set of relations between objects or events?

Science does not provide us with a definitive answer to any of these questions, because scientists are themselves divided about such fundamental issues (if they formulate them at all). Relativity and quantum physics notably hold very different (and probably incompatible) notions about space and time. In general relativity, the structure of space is determined by gravitation (i.e. by matter), but the space of quantum physics seems given and independent of events within it. In the circumstances, the best that philosophy can hope to provide is to formulate such questions as lucidly and precisely as possible.

The problem here is that as finite beings with finite experience, we might not be able to reason about actual infinity. All our experience and cognitive apparatus can only deal with finite events, so when we talk about infinity, we should be very clear what we mean. One reasonable answer is that "infinity" is really shorthand for a boundless number of steps, not an actual entity (but now, what does "boundless" really mean?). Perhaps we have no right to argue about notions we do not fully understand and cannot test empirically.

This being said, we may tentatively propose an answer, subject to revision if need be. If we suppose that time and space are absolute notions, fundamentally independent of events within them (a debatable but reasonable assumption), then time and space are probably infinite in any conceivable direction, without bounds and without beginning or end. We could also posit space and time as a conceptual framework for all experience, a solution akin to Kant's proposal that they should be seen as fundamental categories of perception. His position that space and time are *a priori* and absolute is no longer credible, however, because we now have competing variants for their structure (non-Euclidean geometries for example).

Time is also very peculiar in that it appears to flow in one direction only. But time is inextricably bound with the notion of change, an occurrence that we can observe daily in our life. The fact that many changes are irreversible entails that time is fundamentally directed (as an arrow). The psychological perception of time, due to the persistence of memories in the present, also gives time its directed nature. Whether the mental conception of time can be harmonized with its more objective manifestations is one more question to consider…

The world is constantly evolving

Our knowledge of the world is evolving regularly, and the world itself is constantly changing. Nothing is stable, every structure is temporary. Physical, biological and social structures wax and wane and undergo constant transformation (within widely variable time frames). Nothing is permanent but the universe itself, everything within the world is in constant flux. Science often looks (more or less successfully) for abstract invariants behind an ever-changing surface reality, but such invariants are but constraints on constant change.

Not only is the world constantly changing, but many changes are irreversible, Classical mechanics tended to consider change as reversible, and its equations did not assume a particular direction in time. But we now know that many phenomena are irreversible. For example, the second principle of thermodynamics says that entropy can only increase in a closed system, change is often irreversible in quantum physics and dynamical systems can diverge irretrievably. The expansion of the universe and the Big Bang theory also indicate that the whole cosmos undergoes dramatic change on a grand scale (to the best of present knowledge). We must face the fact that our world will change inevitably and may diverge in irreversible ways (for our small planet, global warming comes to mind), so that we cannot take its present state for granted, nor go back to a former state.

We are the results of history

Our whole world is the result of a very long history (probably billions of years) which has known constant change (on various time scales). From the evolution of galaxies to the evolution of microbes, the very structure of the world cannot be totally understood if we don't consider its history. Functional explanations are all very well but they are not sufficient, all the more so because there is probably no steady state in the long-term, as systems of all kinds and sizes keep evolving.

Societies in particular are a product of history, the results of an accumulation of countless changes, which are often unpredictable and usually irreversible. Economists talk of "path dependency": once a path has been chosen, explicitly or not, there is no going back to a previous fork in the road. We can only go forward, starting from the present state of affairs. What is the case in economics is also true of social structure, culture and social values. And there is no obvious reason why morality itself would be exempt from historical change.

Such historical consciousness is actually fairly new in the West: it dates mainly from the middle of the 19th century (Darwinian evolution theory would be the best example, among others). The ancient Greeks viewed the cosmos as essentially stable and unchanging, and classical philosophers of the 17th century held a mostly

static view of the world. On a smaller scale, quite a few people still believe in the possibility of a perfect political system that would last forever. But we now know better, as contemporary science presents us with a fundamentally dynamic view of reality. And Chinese culture has always been highly conscious of the inevitable changes brought by the passage of time (impermanence is one the main themes in Buddhism for instance, and close to Taoist beliefs).

There is only one substance

Descartes distinguished two substances, mind and matter, whereas Spinoza argued forcefully for one substance only, identified with the universe itself. Following Spinoza, we believe there is only one substance, or energy (they are absolutely equivalent), which manifests itself in many ways and innumerable details that keep changing. It is often useful in practice to talk about semi-permanent substances (such as chemical elements, atoms, elementary particles, fundamental forces, etc.), but scientific research usually reduces them sooner or later to a (temporary) combination of simpler units. Yet the unending quest for ultimate components or forces seems eventually doomed to fail, because everything is actually in flux, and ultimate units are themselves unstable, constantly changing, and to be found only in combination ("quarks" for example).

In fact the very notion of substance is highly suspect. This notion has some practical validity at our spatial and time scale, but breaks down at the (sub) atomic scale and within high-energy cosmic events. Contemporary physics shows us a world composed of events rather than permanent substances. So speaking of a single substance is just a way to speak in familiar terms about the universe itself in its totality, and not an accurate description, whether empirically or theoretically. Strictly speaking, there just aren't any stable distinct substances.

The world is hierarchically structured

Our world is hierarchically structured, however, and temporary but fairly stable structures can be observed, with various sizes and timespans. The objects of everyday life (rocks, tables, buildings as well as mountains and planets) are basically stable, but hierarchically composed of units that will eventually fall apart with time. Many of them are man-made artifacts with an obvious structure, but natural objects are also composite and temporary (mountains are being slowly eroded, stars will eventually explode or collapse). Note also that many natural phenomena (such as rivers and weather patterns) are (fairly) stable forms rather than solid objects.

Biological life is particularly well structured, thanks to complex mechanisms for maintaining inner cohesion and a stable metabolism, but is otherwise unexceptional. We may feel admiration for the complexity, stability, variety and adaptability of biological structures, but they can be reduced in principle to simpler physical and chemical phenomena. It is interesting to observe that biological beings exhibit stable structures rather than stable matter (which is constantly flowing in and out of the structure). But biological structures are too complex not to decay within years (although genes are transmitted from one generation to the next, and may thus be said to survive individuals, but genes are also subject to regular random mutations).

Societies and cultures are also very complex functional structures, but show less coherence, and more flexibility and variation than biological structures. The fact that every human society is underpinned by an immaterial culture subject to discussion and change makes human societies particularly unstable and adaptable (much more so than animal societies). If moreover human societies and social life are dynamical systems, they would also be unpredictable (which seems indeed to be the case). The age-old quest for the perfect social organization, the perfect political or economic system, the best moral rules is then a monstrous illusion, which has unfortunately been the cause of much violence and bloodshed throughout human history till recent times. In short, societies are highly structured but also subject to constant change.

The universe is ultimately non-local

Even though our everyday world can usually (and usefully) be analyzed into parts, this doesn't prove to be the case for the whole universe. For one thing, our world is permeated with gravitational or electromagnetic fields, which are non-local phenomena. One possible interpretation could be that the universe is nothing but the interplay of various fields, hence a basically global entity. Yet fields can be cut up according to a grid into local domains of arbitrary size, so this is perhaps a matter of point of view. And the influence of a physical field (in case of variations for example) cannot exceed the speed of light.

Even more remarkable, however, some sub-atomic phenomena are fundamentally non-local. Particles can be linked by *instantaneous* interactions at a distance, without any intervening cause. This phenomenon of "quantum entanglement" has been very much discussed, but now seems undeniable (even if belonging to a rather esoteric branch of quantum physics, and invisible at our scale). We have to acknowledge that the world cannot be totally analyzed into independent units. The strategy of cutting up the world into simpler and smaller components was reasonable in Descartes' time (it was the second of his four

methodological rules) and has indeed proven very fruitful, but it cannot be completely accepted nowadays. Non-locality is inescapable, and we have to consider that a holistic and systemic viewpoint has now become inevitable, at least to some extent.

The spirit of analysis, i.e. the belief that the world should be best analyzed into smaller units, and that relations are secondary at best, has been the dominant attitude in Western thought since the Renaissance and until the middle 19th century. This viewpoint has been very fruitful, as it has allowed classical science to deal successfully with the easiest and most obvious features of our environment. Classical science was occupied mostly with linear systems, where interactions are additive, obvious and predictable. This viewpoint is still prevalent in many common forms of thought, such as engineering, economics, or law (less so in biology or sociology). But a totally undiluted analytical attitude is no longer compatible with contemporary science, and is probably responsible for many of the ills affecting today's world, such as economic crises, global warming, soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, etc. Considering technical and economic issues in the narrowest fashion, without considering their wider impact, is very efficient in the short term, but now gravely endangers our world as a whole.

It has now become painfully evident that large portions of the world cannot be analyzed without residue, and contemporary sciences have explored many domains where a systemic, global viewpoint is unavoidable: Darwinian evolution, relativity, quantum physics, dynamical systems… Holism, i.e. the belief that the world is unavoidably global and that relations are of paramount importance, has been a minority position in Western philosophy, but should be considered with more respect and care. Holism has always been the dominant attitude in Eastern thought (in Buddhism notably) but it was a pre-scientific doctrine, which appealed to some philosophers but lacked influence in the scientific world. Some form of holism now seems unavoidable, and it is time to come to terms with this conceptual change.

The world is both deterministic and random

A large proportion of our everyday world is obviously deterministic, and thus mostly predictable. If this was not the case, it would be very difficult for us to navigate the world and to make plans for the future. Learning to walk, using tools, shooting arrows and guns, operating machines, etc. would be impossible if the world wasn't so reliably predictable. On a larger scale, the majestic movement of stars and planets is perhaps the best example of deterministic laws.

Yet there are also numerous random events in the universe, and this randomness seems irreducible, to the best of present knowledge. Randomness stems from at least two different sources: instability at the atomic level, unpredictability of

dynamical systems. At the atomic level, many events are fundamentally random (or to be more precise, appear to be random when we try to measure them). For example, whether (and when) a given atom in a radioactive substance will disintegrate is unpredictable. We can only ascertain the *probability* of its disintegration, which means that the radioactive decay of a mass of atoms will follow a perfectly deterministic (exponential) law, in spite of its fundamentally random nature. So what appears deterministic on a larger scale is actually based on random events at a (much) smaller scale.

Complex systems composed of many interacting elements are also unpredictable, even when following deterministic interaction laws. Such systems are called dynamical systems, and they are quite common in nature. For example the weather cannot be reliably predicted after a few days, even though the physics of the atmosphere is now well understood. The reasons for this unpredictability are rather subtle, but they hinge upon the sensitivity to initial conditions and the inevitable imprecision of the initial data. These systems will quickly diverge drastically, even when actuated by deterministic mechanisms, so they are unpredictable in practice, thus presenting us with another source of randomness.

The opposition determinism vs. randomness appears to depend on the scale of the phenomena involved, following a U shape. At the atomic level, randomness is prevalent and unavoidable, but our daily world (including planetary motion) is mostly deterministic, and on a larger scale still, complex dynamical systems are practically unpredictable. Modern science (starting during the Renaissance) has dealt mostly with the predictable world in the middle of this range (Galileo and Newton would be the prime examples), and come up with very successful deterministic laws. As biological beings, we are closely attuned (physically and cognitively) to this basically predictable world, and we would be a very different species indeed if we'd had to live in a non-deterministic environment. But contemporary science (from the middle of the 19th century onward) has explored other areas at both ends of the physical range: radioactivity, quantum physics, statistical mechanics as well as Darwinian evolution and dynamical systems. By and large we still find it rather difficult to accept the consequences of these conceptual advances, but non-determinism is now undeniable and unavoidable.

By the way, this mixture of determinism and randomness probably explains to some extent the persistence of the age-old debate about free will. Philosophers such as Descartes or Spinoza who believed in a deterministic universe tended to throw doubt (explicitly or not) upon the existence of free will. But we are complex biological (and cognitive) beings living in a complex social environment, which is clearly not totally predictable. So we have strong intuitions about the unpredictability of our behavior (and about the behavior of others). As social beings subjected to numerous influences from an unpredictable environment, it is

very natural to attribute the resulting human unpredictability to free will, which is perhaps nothing else than the sum total of random influences.

Mental processes can be reduced in principle to physical events

Thought, cognition, mental events, whatever one might want to call our psychological life, is nothing in principle but the working of our central nervous system. The reduction of mental events to physical events in our brain has not yet been proven beyond any doubt, but the evidence is overwhelming. The reciprocal correlation between neural activity and mental events has now been so well documented by research in neuroscience that the physical basis of cognitive activity seems difficult to deny. Philosophers have bravely played up the concept of "supervenience" to suggest that mental events could still be irreducible to physical events, even if the two domains were totally co-extensive, but this looks like a desperate quibble to safeguard traditional views of the mind.

We can conclude that there is no particular place in this world for what has variously been called soul, spirit, mind, ego… detached from our physical body. The traditional distinction between body and mind is simply untenable. When the body ceases to function, so does our mind. There is no immortality to hope for from the undeniable, but limited existence of mental events. The only kind of immortality we could achieve would be by a quasi-mystical identification with the universe of which we are part.

The existence of the individual ego is also debatable, by the way. Buddhist philosophy has always forcefully contested the very notion of the ego. Mental event are the only discernable reality, and the ego is in fact a construction, an abstract concept rather than a primary phenomenon. Yet the ego remains a very convincing illusion, due to the persistence of memories, the supervenience on a stable physical body, and its prevalence in modern Western culture. Although a basic notion of European culture, it requires much closer scrutiny.

Facts and ideas

It is customary for a general philosophy to include a theory of knowledge. But one could look into science for such a theory, because science is now the most rigorous, coherent and efficient kind of knowledge at our disposal, and scientific methods have much to tell us about how to acquire valid knowledge. As a matter of fact, contemporary science now largely includes its own epistemology (notably in quantum physics). For more than a century now, the most elaborate philosophies of knowledge have been elaborated by scientists or scientist-philosophers (Mach or Russell for example).

We think the scientific method can be reduced to two main principles: empirical facts are the ultimate source of knowledge, but only when considered within the framework of abstract theories (formal models if possible). This distinction has been clearly expressed by the logical positivist movement (carefully distinguishing empirical facts from logical formalisms) but is now a common point of view. Metaphysics is condemned because it cannot be empirically verified (or refuted), while recognizing the crucial importance of formalisms for scientific theories.

The distinction between facts and ideas is debatable, however. If you look closely enough, this distinction disappears. In practice, there are no facts without ideas and no ideas without facts. Facts are not given, but chosen and painstakingly elaborated within a theory (which gives them their significance). And ideas have an empirical basis or origin (they would otherwise be useless). This is one more reason to reject the distinction between mind and matter: there is only one reality, in which facts and ideas are inextricably entwined. Mind and matter are just two sides of the same coin.

Mankind is part of this world

Mankind is part of the biological realm, which belongs itself to the physical world. Biological creatures exhibit special characteristics (e.g. higher levels of organization, autonomy from the environment and adaptability) but they are fundamentally physical systems. Similarly mankind is a unique species (with a capacity for language coupled with a particular ability for reflexive thought) but is still part of the animal world in many ways. We now realize more and more how close human beings really are to other primates in their emotional and social life. Some birds also show amazing cognitive abilities, have a complex social life and prove highly adaptable.

It is true that mankind now plays a unique role on this planet. Their intelligence and social organization, enhanced by language and cultural constructs, have enabled humans to dominate other animals and to drastically modify this planet through agriculture, industry and urbanization. It remains to be seen whether this unbridled domination won't prove self-destructive in the end (because of large-scale pollution for instance), but this is a truly impressive achievement. Nevertheless, mankind is still part of the physical and biological world, and more dependent on this environment that humans care to admit.

If mankind is part and parcel of the physical world, it cannot and should not claim a special place in the world, apart from other animals and from the environment. Mankind doesn't have a special role to play in the universe, and there might well exist other intelligent beings somewhere else (on another planet for instance). In other words, the world doesn't revolve around mankind as our

ancestors tended to believe. We are indeed a unique species, but basically immersed in a larger environment.

Mankind does exhibit special characteristics, notably the development of complex cultures and a high degree of autonomy from the environment. A specific place attributed to mankind should derive from such objective characteristics, not from some special role assigned *a priori* by religious tradition or by a naïve anthropocentrism. Human societies should be examined objectively, without bias or indulgence, to ascertain their organization, modes of functioning and cultural precepts. In particular, morality is part of culture, but probably secondary to social organization, and to be examined objectively as any other cultural artifacts.

There are no God-given moral rules

It follows that there are no given moral rules, no *a priori* morality. Moral codes are always a human construct, which should be justified explicitly and rationally, without recourse to extraneous (e.g. religious) considerations. Very early, many classical Chinese thinkers have clearly stated that morality is a social construct, not a divine command; for example the Confucian author Xunzi (3rd century BC) says that "the Way is not the Way of Heaven". Only practical, and possibly biological reasons must be adduced to defend moral rules. There is no logical reason why the general march of rationalization should stop at moral or social rules (although the practical consequences might well be awkward indeed). If nothing is sacred anymore, morality itself cannot be exempted from critical examination.

All our customary, hallowed moral rules are then up for re-appraisal: the dignity of the individual, the belief in equality, the whole panoply of human rights as well the usual prohibition against murder, theft and sexual misconduct. From a theoretical point of view, we have a perfect right to suspend belief in ordinary morality and to examine the validity and foundations of moral rules. We may hope to find a more secure foundation for them, or to modify them for the better, or even to replace them entirely. We should not prejudge the eventual conclusions of this theoretical enquiry, any more than one should start a physical experiment with the results decided in advance. Rationality should apply to morality as well as to other natural or social phenomena.

The decay of religion is significant

For at least a century now, we have witnessed in the West, particularly in Western Europe, the slow decay of organized religion (mostly Christianity). Many people still go through the motions of attending church from time to time (if only to get christened, married or buried) but they don't really believe in religious dogma

any longer and certainly do not obey the prescriptions of the Church in their private life (notably in sexual matters). The slow collapse of traditional religion has of course been largely commented upon (to be variously lamented or cheered) but few people seem to have faced the consequences squarely. The whole value system of the West was organized around Christian beliefs and values, and the demise of Christianity means that moral values are now up in the air, so to speak, without any serious basis or foundation.

Americans are more coherent than Europeans in this respect. A majority of American (although a slowly declining one) still believes in Christianity (or at least a simplified version of Christian values). They can thus uphold moral rules that are sanctioned and supported by Christianity, and they are also more inclined to view morality as absolute. But Europeans live in a moral vacuum, pretending to respect social rules deprived of any serious foundation, which beg for re-evaluation. It is amusing to observe that the progressive left, who has been the most critical of traditional religious values, now harbors the most dogmatic defenders of human rights and equality, possibly because they are more or less aware of the need to reinforce a largely empty belief system.

The problem is different in Asia, because the Far East was not Christian in the first place, and society has never been organized around God-given moral rules. Instead some rather pragmatic mixture of Confucian and Buddhist values was prevalent, and modernization (although tragically disruptive in many respects) has not had the same ethical consequences as in the West. Confucian ethics was mostly social (with an explicit refusal to appeal to any kind of transcendence) and has better withstood the test of time. As a matter of fact, Confucian values still seem alive and effective in Asia, in spite of modernization.

Recent history explains recent attitudes

The mostly uncritical deference shown toward human rights today is a perfectly understandable (and largely commendable) reaction to the horrors of 20th century Europe: widespread massacres, genocide, torture and mayhem on a scale unprecedented in human history. The revulsion that followed such horrifying events explains why so many people embraced the doctrine of human rights after World War II and would be highly reluctant to question them in any way. The general feeling is that human rights are but a fragile safeguard against renewed atrocities, and we would question them at our peril.

This post-war revulsion was not only moral but also quite practical. Nazi Germany, the regime that committed the most egregious acts of inhumanity (although it was far from being the only one) was an object lesson in the perils of unrelenting, reckless aggression. The Nazi regime devastated a large part of Europe

and caused unfathomable suffering, but it also brought wide-scale destruction upon its own people (and culture). Stalinism was also responsible for mass murder in Russia and Eastern Europe, and for the brutal overthrow of traditional social norms. Human rights and democratic values have then been an attempt to prevent the return of a very specific history.

Yet two generations have now gone by since the end of World War II, and it is probably time now to take stock and evaluate anew the nature and importance of human rights. The passage of time also means that memories fade, so that the horrors of the 20th century are being slowly forgotten, or just do not have the same emotional urgency any more. There has recently been in the world a revival of hatred and intolerance, which mere moral exhortations are unlikely to calm down. A more objective approach to morality might be more appropriate.

Conformity is wise

In the meantime, however, it seems wise to conform by and large to received morality. We still have to go on living in the society we happen to be part of, and we should keep behaving in the usual way. It would be unkind, imprudent and probably unproductive to attack customary moral rules before we can propose anything better or more solid. And we might end up with nothing better than a morass of self-doubt and uncertainty, so that sticking for now with received customs appears perfectly reasonable.

More generally, we are social animals as well as biological beings, and one had better conform to the general pattern of one's context, whether physical, biological, social or cultural. Feeling intellectually free to examine and analyze one's environment can be productive in the long term, but we should not underestimate the extent to which we belong to and are entangled with the various layers of our surroundings. Day to day living is mostly achieved by countless spontaneous, unreflective decisions, which are best made by being attuned to the physical, biological or social environment. Free intellectual enquiry is fine, but not advisable for daily decision-making.

Human beings are social animals

Human beings are social animals and some form of social bond is always implicit in any human society. The idea of the individual, fundamentally free from social determinism, and able to enter into a social contract with other individuals, is a theoretical fiction that can be useful in political theory, but is devoid of historical or ethnological reality. Society always comes first in time and function. Members of society are born, bred, socialized and educated within their social group, and are

basically determined by the group they belong to. They have some degree of freedom (larger in modern society than in traditional groups) but usually to a very small extent. In fact most human beings have no wish to escape from the boundaries of their social group, apart from the most superficial aspects of behavior (e.g. hairstyle or make of car). Security and belonging are usually more important than individuality or freedom.

It would be unrealistic to analyze social life, and the moral rules that accompany social organization in our species, without keeping firmly in mind the primacy of society over its members. The fundamental role of social rules is to allow society to function as well as possible, not to protect individuals. Because most individuals could not survive outside a functioning society, they will naturally obey and respect social rules that are not made specifically for them, but for society as a whole. It is only in the richest and most advanced cultures that more consideration can be given to individual wishes (often in a manner more symbolic than real), as long as society itself does not feel threatened.

There are many possible social structures

If society always comes first and there are no *a priori* moral rules, many kinds of social structures are in fact possible and greatly different types have been attested in the course of history. The matter should be seen as objectively and dispassionately as any other scientific issue. The real test of a social organization is eventually of a biological (evolutionary) nature: whether it proves sufficiently stable and efficient to ensure the survival of the group as a whole. Just like any other biological, social or cultural trait, moral rules will prevail and last if and only if they are transmitted from one generation to the next. Groups with more efficient rules will displace or subjugate other groups and their values. Because the link between morality and efficiency is far from direct, however, there is still room for a lot of variation in systems of values.

The question would then be: which rules or systems of rules work best to make a society reasonably efficient in the long term? We have seen throughout history many types of social organization, many of them strikingly unequal: feudal societies ruled by aristocracies, societies organized around slavery, caste societies, capitalist systems, etc. All societies have social hierarchies, and most cultures have strongly-typed gender roles. Instead of condemning them out of hand in the name of our democratic values, we should examine them objectively to see whether they might pass the test of time. Can they last without too much strife? Are they inherently stable or do they require a constant level of violence? Are they efficient enough? And how can they deal with external threats? Such are the questions we should answer, but the issue of violence comes to the fore.

The problem of violence

A central issue for organized society is the problem posed by violence. We are a remarkably violent and aggressive species, forming well-organized groups, and these are important reasons for our success (so far) on this planet. We have wiped out, decimated, subjugated or displaced most other life forms, and violence between humans is clearly one of the main engines of history and technical progress. We are loath to recognize this basic fact about ourselves, because violence is also very disruptive for any organized society, and condemned as a consequence by most moral systems.

Violence comes in many forms, but can be roughly divided into two main kinds: external and internal. External violence, i.e. war between whole communities or states has been a regular occurrence throughout history, because conflicts of interest are inevitable and it is always tempting to resort to brute force. As long as war remains more or less ritualized (which is often the case in traditional warfare) it won't jeopardize an organized society (and may strengthen social ties). There is, however, the danger of being crushed and wiped out as a culture, and unceasing warfare may consume an unsustainable amount of resources. War is always a risky business, to be considered with caution.

Internal strife is less common, but can be catastrophic because it tears apart the vary fabric of society: what is at stake is social organization itself. Random violence or mere banditry is unpleasant enough, but violence between factions becomes quickly unbearable, because the enemy is now our neighbor within society. It is well known that civil wars tend to be particularly vicious and destructive, and the aftermath may affect a country for generations or even doom a society to terminal failure. So internal violence, organized or chaotic, is even more of a danger to society.

Yet violence cannot be totally eradicated, a fact that traditional societies were well aware of, and that we try to ignore or deny at our peril. The problem for society is not to do away with violence completely, but to keep it in check. Violence is part of our species, and we should be realistic about it, and not harbor dangerous illusions. The first goal of morality should not be the happiness or freedom of the individual, but simply to make sure that violence (whether external or internal) is kept within reasonable bounds. A society that doesn't ensure this basic requirement is likely to fail sooner or later (whatever its other merits).

Mankind has therefore devised many rituals to contain violence. When examining our history, it appears that brute, naked violence is in fact rather rare. External wars follow largely predictable avenues of behavior, and even civil wars have limited ends. In the developed world today, life is basically very safe, except

for recurrent, but occasional acts of terrorism or random violence. Large-scale violence has been relegated to the margins of our world, typically in failed countries or disorganized regions (bad enough in human terms, but not a serious threat to organized societies).

Unfortunately, the advent of industrial warfare and the development of weapons of mass destruction threaten to bypass the fragile barriers mankind has put together to control violence. Modern rationality applied to warfare has given us the means and the potentiality to annihilate ourselves as a species. The danger is now perhaps less frequent, but even more acute, and the threat of large-scale violence is still very much with us. We are not done with the question of violence, and very possibly never will be.

Pragmatic justifications for moral rules

It is within this overall context that morality should be evaluated. There are strong pragmatic considerations for the adoption and respect of moral and social rules, namely the overwhelming need do deal with the constant threat of violence. Nothing is so useful to men as other men, but nothing is more dangerous and more threatening (since other men are potentially as aggressive and intelligent as we are). It is therefore in our common interest to adopt strict codes of behavior and to enforce them as best as we can.

We are not merely rehashing here familiar arguments for the social contract, as advocated by Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke or Rousseau among others. We must repeat that a social contract between free individuals is a theoretical fiction, and a historical fallacy. Society just doesn’t function in this way, as social organization always comes first, before any individual consciousness. Moral rules are not freely adopted by individuals, but imposed by society upon its members, who have little choice in the matter. Although society is composed of individual members, it is primarily a collective entity. Moral rules are no more freely chosen than our native language or our social status. It is but an illusion to think otherwise.

So it is fundamentally mistaken to assume that individuals choose to enter into a social contract for the sake of self-preservation. Their prevailing interest lies with the preservation of society itself, because their safety and comfort does indeed depend on the existence of a well-organized society, but most people also identify with the society and culture they belong to. Preserving and fostering a common language, religion, culture, identity and polity is just as important (and often more so) than mere self-preservation. If this was not the case, much of history would be incomprehensible, but classical authors failed to take social identity into account (possibly because they didn’t want to acknowledge the existence of collective passions after the disastrous religious wars in Europe).

By the way, this is the main reason (beside obvious practical difficulties) why it has proved impossible to establish a world government or a truly international authority, despite all proposals and attempts in this direction. Social contract theory would make us believe that it would be in the rational interest of most nations to relinquish absolute sovereignty and submit to a central authority in order to avoid the dangerous "war of all against all". But this just doesn't happen because there is no previous international entity one could identify with, and strong enough to supersede national identities (this also explains the desperate travails of the European Community in trying to forge a common identity).

So far, so good: it is obvious for pragmatic reasons that no human society could do without moral rules of some kind. The question remains, however: when considering the variety of social rules seen throughout history, which rules should we adopt? But this question should be better rephrased as a more objective one: which rules are more likely to make a society successful, and thus likely to prevail in the long term? For this type of empirical enquiry to proceed, we first have to suspend our ordinary propensity to moral judgment.

Descriptive vs. prescriptive stance

Moral rules are usually discussed (defended or criticized) on specific moral grounds, i.e. from a prescriptive (or normative) stance. The essence of morality seems to be prescriptive, to consist in obligations rather than facts. Some primary values are generally posited or established (such as equality, freedom, benevolence…), and particular social obligations are then derived from these values. Such values are meant to be absolute commands, not mere social observations or simple recommendations.

We take here a descriptive (or objective) stance, however. Moral rules are social facts to be found in various societies. Some rules are fairly universal (notably the prohibition of murder for personal reasons) but many are quite variable (family structure and sexual morality are amazingly diverse). So there is nothing wrong in principle with a hierarchical or unequal social structure, and it might well prove quite stable. Yet pragmatic considerations of efficiency, stability, and general harmony would suggest a more egalitarian society, but this is to be examined and discussed as objectively as possible, without ideological prejudice.

It can be observed that some types of society seem to have become more efficient and more successful than others, and we may ask whether their moral rules are inherently better from a pragmatic point of view. The moral code might be one of the reasons for a society's efficiency. The remarkable success of modern industrial society is probably associated with its relative equality of rights and conditions, which seems to be required for such a society to function smoothly. In

this way, a prescriptive stance might be regained (if so wished) but only *a posteriori* after examining all the relevant facts.

Morality is inherently normative

However hard we try to evaluate moral rules objectively, it remains that morality is inherently normative (differing thus from mere customs). It may be the case that morality primarily fulfills a practical biological function in making social groups more cohesive and co-operative, hence more efficient and better able to survive. But even if morality is the objective result of evolution and can be socially justified on practical grounds, the normative nature and the specific content of moral rules are most probably the result of cultural history, and not just of evolutionary biology. Humans have always reasoned explicitly, passionately and at length about their moral codes.

Mankind has expressed fundamental moral rules as obligations, not just as social customs or good practice. Making rules absolute and unconditional could be a way to make morality even more efficient, and the imperative conception of morality might be the result of natural selection. But this is also the result of the remarkable human tendency to turn general ideas into platonic ideals. There is in mankind an amazing capacity to transmute experience into absolute forms; this has been the source of the best in human culture (mathematics and philosophy for instance) but also of the worst (notably religious intolerance and totalitarian ideologies). Idealization is both a useful generalization mechanism and the cause of highly dangerous errors.

There is also considerable resistance to any attempt to evaluate moral rules objectively and to relativize them from a non-normative point of view. This resistance can be compared to the long and arduous struggle to escape from the dictates of Christianity (or any other organized religion). Such repugnance is not due to mere conservatism, it is a predictable consequence of the very nature of morality that it proves so hard to appraise freely. As a matter of fact, many people will renounce specific moral rules only when they have found other absolute rules to replace them!

The appeal of absolute morality also stems from the desire to do away with the frequent ambiguity of moral decisions. Practical morality is difficult and awkward, because there are usually competing claims or considerations to balance in order to reach a judgment. The whole legal system for instance is an imperfect attempt to evaluate the relative weight of competing demands. Such ambiguity is deeply troubling and bothersome, hence the temptation to resort to absolute judgments and be done with moral uncertainty.

Men are practically equal

Although men have very different abilities, ambitions, energy and strength, the use of weapons make men practically equal (and speaking of men here is appropriate, because women rarely use weapons). Many a king has been killed by a mere commoner with a knife, a peasant with a crossbow could fell a knight in armor, and now guns make anybody a potential assassin. The lesson of history is clear: most men are equally dangerous and potentially deadly, nobody is immune from the threat of violence from other men.

Brute force, constant repression, religious or political propaganda can keep men in check to some extent, but not all of them all the time, so that people in power can never feel totally safe. It might be better to avoid giving rivals and commoners strong reasons to rebel against authority, and granting them some say and some interest in the political structure usually lessens the appetite for violence (at least in the long term). So a more egalitarian society might be more stable and peaceful, less troubled by tensions and social strife, less prone to violence.

Another reason to advocate for equality is that freer men are often more energetic and more efficient. Free peasants are usually more productive than serfs or slaves. An egalitarian society can better harness the energy and resourcefulness of its members toward common goals, making such a society more efficient in the long term than authoritarian regimes. This seems to be broadly true, and advanced economies are often associated with democratic regimes (although economic efficiency might still demand some degree of inequality). Tocqueville also remarked that democracies start by losing wars but often end up winning them when all their members have banded their energy together.

Lastly, there is in mankind as well as in many animals a deep-seated, almost physical desire for the maximum freedom possible. This desire for freedom struggles with the equally powerful yearning to belong, but remains evident. Many people (though not all) will try to gain as much freedom of action as they can, even if only some wriggle-room within the bonds of society. This tendency is universal, but is particularly strong in developed societies, where economic affluence and a complex social organization allow and foster a degree of freedom that would not be practical in a poorer economy.

Advanced industrial and post-industrial economies with their complex division of labor and flexible organization also require a high degree of individual autonomy from their members. It is simply impossible otherwise to adapt to constantly changing circumstances, as adaptability cannot be dictated from above. Freedom is usually presented as a social and political value, but it is also a practical necessity for the management of advanced capitalist society. The fact that freedom

and equality have often turned into violent political passions is due to other causes, which we will analyze later.

Now all these considerations only suggest general directions, depending on the situation, and do not amount to absolute laws. It might well happen that in specific circumstances (external war, economic crisis, rapid social or economic change for example) less freedom and more authority prove necessary or useful. It is not difficult to find cases (notably in Asia) where rapid development was successfully engineered from above with a heavy hand. Whether such a model of development can go on once an advanced stage of the economy has been reached, is as much an empirical question as a political one (rather than a moral one).

Unequal societies require violence

Because men are equally dangerous (at least potentially), maintaining a grossly unequal society cannot be achieved without the use of violence. In Antiquity as well as in more recent times, slaves were usually abducted by force and slavery can only be maintained by the constant use of the most brutal violence. Caste systems and feudal societies are less blatantly violent, but the social hierarchy is preserved by the common knowledge (and regular experience) in all sectors of society that the ruling class will not hesitate to resort to violence if need be to defend its status.

Yet brute violence is very costly materially and psychologically, so that all kinds of legitimation strategies have been elaborated and used throughout history. Hierarchies have been justified by various religious, racial, or cultural considerations, made more or less credible by relentless indoctrination. Long-standing social habits and ingrained beliefs have often been in fact more powerful than any coherence such justifications could claim. A dim conscience of some basic social contract may also help: even for a slave, the security of the status quo might be preferable to the anarchy of freedom. But social order ultimately rests on the willingness to resort to brute force. The cost might be worth paying if the benefits are high enough, even if the balance of power will remain unstable in the long run.

Unequal societies can then be stable for a period of time that may last for centuries, but at the cost of violence and obfuscation. The price to be paid is a high level of violence, actual or potential, as well as the need to maintain effective repression forces. The obfuscation concomitant with the debatable justifications of inequality is also psychologically and intellectually damaging, and difficult to reconcile with more general values. With the passage of time, equality might become more appealing than a traditional hierarchy.

In short, equality and freedom are practical values, justifiable because of their social benefits. They are to be regularly re-evaluated in context, and not seen as absolute principles to uphold at all cost whatever the particular circumstances.

Societies do in fact put aside their most cherished principles when necessary (notably in wartime) but this is done more or less on the sly, without a clear public awareness of what is at stake. It would be better to acknowledge openly that the balance of power has been modified for practical reasons, to be modified again later when conditions change again.

The case for conservatism

Progressive values (such as equality, individual freedom, etc.) can indeed be justified for practical reasons. But they should be judged in actual context: progress might well cause as much (or more) harm than good in specific situations. The overall balance should always be carefully considered before embarking upon novel social or cultural schemes, however appealing they may seem in the abstract. This type of reasoning would advocate for conservatism, a political philosophy with a long history (particularly in Great Britain since Burke) in spite of its current lack of favor with the general public.

Conservatism is skeptical of absolute values and wary of dogmatic political beliefs. Conservative thinkers stress that society is a complex and fairly opaque organism, whose functioning and mechanisms we understand but poorly. Social hierarchies are questionable, but they might fulfill a useful function. Institutions have evolved by trial and error to reach a fragile balance of forces, the result of a long common history. One should respect this legacy and not fiddle in vain with time-tested traditions, least of all in pursuit of abstract values and unproven ideas (all this is clearly very British).

There is a strong pragmatic streak in conservatism, a preference for practical experience in contrast with abstract reasoning. This pragmatism also means that conservative thinkers are in fact not opposed to social change in itself, because they know that society evolves inevitably, like any organism in the face of changing circumstances. What they really object to is the modern passion for grand political ideologies and reckless social or economic experiments. But conservatism is perhaps more a general attitude, a turn of mind rather than a political doctrine.

Progressive beliefs often hide darker passions

Ever since the French Revolution and particularly during the 20th century in Europe and elsewhere, progressive political movements, supposedly fighting for social progress, equality and fraternity have committed large-scale massacres and countless crimes in the name of virtue. Communism has killed more people for the sake of social emancipation than Nazism or Fascism. This is no accident: passionate beliefs are too often an excuse for the age-old quest for power, and

dogmatic beliefs offer an opportunity to exercise tyranny and violence. Progressive folk usually refuse to see the connection between the good they advocate and the reality of the evil they may end up committing, but this has happened so often now as to be hard to deny.

Even with the best of intentions, well-meaning reformists should be wary of the darker passions lurking within their soul. Political infighting may turn into civil war, eliciting primitive emotions leading all too easily to violence, cruelty and tyranny. This is true even in the best of cases, when a reformist's primary motivation is indeed benevolent. But it is also the case that many revolutionaries are attracted by the opportunity for violence in the first place, and ideology is merely a tool to justify their lust for power. The history of revolutions is quite telling in this respect.

To be fair, the worst excesses of the 20th century are also strongly associated with two specific European phenomena: Judeo-Christian messianism, and the advent of modern totalitarian ideologies (either of a leftist or rightist type). These two phenomena are strongly linked, and would deserve a more thorough discussion, which unfortunately lies outside the main argument of this text. Suffice it to say here that the millenarian belief in a paradise to come has too often brought hell on this earth, as religious or secular convictions have justified systematic violence and cruelty. Morality gone berserk is a frightening phenomenon.

Besides being historically associated with drastic violence, progressive attitudes are often nowadays an excuse (largely unconscious) for smugness and petty bullying ("political correctness"). Christian piety in its heyday was accompanied by rather unpleasant behavior: hypocrisy, self-righteousness, intolerance, malicious pleasure in tormenting others. The opportunity to engage in such behavior while feeling morally justified was undoubtedly one of the attractions of religious piety (though, to be fair, not the only one). Christian intolerance is fortunately much less prevalent now because religion has lost its iron grip on most people (although it has taken centuries of struggle to reach the present level of freedom).

Yet the ugly side of Christian virtue has been neatly taken over by progressives, who now exhibit the same smugness, the same tendency to denounce and hector unbelievers, the same malice without remorse. Of course they cannot and will not admit to their failings, since they see themselves as morally superior. Feeling and appearing virtuous is such a powerful motivation as to make people blind to their actual behavior. Strong moral convictions can be admirable when associated with real courage, but they are too often a pretext for lording it over others. Prigs and bigots sometimes show admirable fortitude in the face of adversity, but this doesn't make them any more pleasant.

Contextual rules are more flexible

If moral rules are justified primarily for pragmatic reasons, however, they are no longer absolute and *a priori*, and must always be evaluated in context. They should also be regularly re-evaluated as their context changes. One should keep in mind that the main goal of morality is to safeguard the smooth functioning of society, and if possible to protect individuals. Nothing less but nothing more.

It ensues that the application of moral rules is constantly enmeshed with practical considerations: would they do more harm than good in given circumstances? There is often no clean solution to the dilemmas involved. To take a concrete example, a dishonest firm should be punished because its fraudulent activity is detrimental to society; but if the legal fines cause the firm to go bankrupt, the social consequences (to employees, suppliers, shareholders, etc.) might be even more harmful. Some compromise could then be considered (e.g. a punishment that doesn't endanger the firm's existence). Arguing that one should distinguish between principles and their application is a mere quibble in real life: in practice it is often impossible to disentangle rules from their consequences.

When moral rules are considered relative to context, they become more flexible and more adaptable. They can be adapted without undue trouble to the particular cases they apply to, and they will evolve naturally with the changing attitudes and needs of the society they are meant to serve. Of course, in order to avoid justifying any dishonesty or crime in this way, one must always keep in mind the greater good. A strict moral compass remains more necessary than ever, but nobody has ever said that morality was an easy matter!

In short, moral rules based on pragmatic justifications are open to constant renegotiation, adaptation and change. This is a far cry from the absolute value assigned to moral rules in many ethical systems. In particular it is fundamentally incompatible with Kant's "categorical imperative" and the dogmatic way he presents it as an absolute, *a priori* principle, regardless of any practical circumstances or consequences.

It is better to negotiate moral rules

If moral rules are negotiable, this should not just be seen as a mere possibility: it is indeed a good idea to try to negotiate them as much as possible. It would often be more efficient and more durable to discuss social rules explicitly before reaching an agreement, rather than imposing them by fiat or by force. For one thing, it means examining the pros and cons of an issue before making a decision, just as in any other practical matter. The final decision will probably be better informed and more appropriate to the particular situation. It might also become more complex and

more muddled, but this generally seems a reasonable price to pay. And a thorough preliminary discussion often makes a decision easier to accept.

In this way, one would quickly retrieve most classical moral precepts (if so wished). Most people fear being killed or physically harmed, would not want others to take away their material goods, object to others sleeping with their sexual partner, wish not to be deprived of their liberty arbitrarily, and so on. Basic moral rules are fairly easy to justify, and more complicated issues (such as abortion or euthanasia) will require more complex discussions (as it should). It is not difficult to reconstruct a whole moral code based on pragmatic reasons, but the rules obtained in this way are of a fundamentally different nature than traditional religious rules, even if their content might remain similar.

Society and individuals

When adopting a purely descriptive moral position, we have to consider very carefully the place of individuals within society. This is classical problem for any ethical system, but a non-normative stance risks sacrificing individuals to the common interest, because there is no place for inalienable individual rights if the common good is the only fundamental value (Hobbes and Rousseau tended toward such an authoritarian view). And individuals are indeed frequently sacrificed to a general cause; in wartime cohorts of young men are routinely sent away to be killed or maimed. But is such a state of affairs truly desirable? Many individuals resent being immolated to the common cause and would certainly like to be protected from a conception of duty at any price.

There are pragmatic reasons to ensure some protection for individuals from the clutches of society. First, we may observe that modern post-industrial society does require a large degree of individual autonomy from its members, which is incompatible with total obedience to the general will. In the West (and parts of Asia) we have now reached a level of individualism from which there is no going back (except in the unlikely eventuality of global social collapse). Ensuring individual rights against collective needs and wishes would then be beneficial or even necessary for the functioning of society as a whole, and therefore strongly advisable within a pragmatic moral system.

In this way, it seems feasible to re-introduce individual rights, notably the prohibition of torture, the protection against arbitrary imprisonment, freedom of speech and political rights. For example, arbitrary imprisonment and torture might seem sometimes justified at first sight to maintain order, but would eventually prove destructive to social cohesion and trust in government. Note, however, that individual rights are no longer absolute in this point of view, but to be evaluated in

practical context. Freedom of speech for instance might have to be limited if need be, preferably in very specific circumstances only.

Pragmatism and utilitarianism

We have taken here a fundamentally pragmatic stance about morality, discarding any vestige of religious, transcendental or metaphysical justification. Such a pragmatic approach can be seen as a type of utilitarianism (or consequentialism), as advocated notably by Bentham and John Stuart Mill. According to utilitarianism, social choices should be made so as to maximize the common good (global or average utility) and not with reference to abstract principles. Utilitarianism is also related to (but not identical with) philosophical pragmatism, the doctrine stating that beliefs and actions are to be evaluated primarily by examining their practical consequences, preferably within a realistic social context.

One still has to define the good more precisely. Reasonable physical well-being and avoidance of harm immediately come to mind, but being able to develop one's capabilities to the fullest extent possible would also be important. And one could recognize a hierarchy of types of good: as a fine wine may bring more pleasure than common plonk, artistic or intellectual pleasures might count for more than bodily satisfactions (although they don't have to be mutually exclusive!). Safeguarding individual rights would also require particular care.

The connection between utilitarianism and pragmatism is that both doctrines try to assess beliefs, values and actions by examining their practical consequences. They are also different: utilitarianism was articulated in Great Britain from the beginning of the 19th century, whereas pragmatism originated in the United States at the end of the same century. The scope of utilitarianism is narrower, as it deals mostly with the ethics for social choices. Pragmatism is a much wider philosophy, dealing with fundamental issues of truth, reality and scientific inquiry (and thus open to more general objections). Yet both schools of thought contextualize and relativize values by looking primarily for their consequences, and are strongly opposed to all essentialist and absolute statements.

Final remarks

What is the connection between the metaphysical and ethical sections of this text? Mainly that the absence of transcendence suggests a pragmatic conception of ethics. The insistence on contextual change in the natural world and a generally systemic outlook also apply to the type of morality we have defended. Otherwise, many details could be modified without endangering the coherence of the whole.

Another possible metaphysical position would be that there is indeed some kind of divinity (an impersonal one for example) that does not care about human affairs, and doesn't justify any particular moral rules. So we would still have to find other practical justifications for morality. This is basically the position of many ancient Chinese thinkers, and the gist of Confucianism in particular.

We have often alluded to classical Chinese thought to support our views (though we could have also found support in minority positions within Western thought). As the general reader might be less familiar with Far-Eastern cultures, one will find a short outline of Chinese beliefs and attitudes at the end of this text. It should help appreciate the coherence and contemporary relevance of this great culture.

ADDENDUM

Far-Eastern Culture

Here is a brief outline of the main features of Chinese culture, with a few references (see Needham 1969 for a general view). Chinese culture has had a strong influence on neighboring countries (notably Korea, Japan, and Vietnam) and is basically a combination of Confucianism (Confucius 2005; Etiemble 1986), Taoism (Laozi 1961, 1967; Zhuangzi 2003; Waley 1934; Kaltenmark 1965; Hansen 2014) and Buddhism (Conze 1959; Watts 1957; Davis 2014). Although Buddhism originally came from northern India, it soon blended with Taoist beliefs. This syncretism resulted in specific social attitudes (Weber 1915) and metaphysical outlook (Perkins 2016).

An organic universe

In Far-Eastern culture, there is no personal God and no creation. The universe is seen as a quasi-biological being, without beginning or end, self-actuated and forever changing. This is primarily a dynamic entity, with the emphasis on vitality and change rather than on any explicit design or purpose. Process is considered more important than structure, and spontaneity and flexibility are paramount values.

Accordingly, any divinity tends to be impersonal. In Chinese culture the highest divinity is called Heaven (*tian* 天) but without any clear features. It was probably originally anthropomorphic, but in the classical period (as early as the 4th century BC) it had become a rather vague and abstract figure. Beyond Heaven looms the Tao or Way (*dao* 道) which is even more indistinct, formless and impersonal, as the guiding principle (or source, or process) that underlies the spontaneous operation of the world. The Way is typically dynamic and an evolving rather than a static structure.

In Japan there are numerous gods or spirits (*kami* 神) but they are mostly formless, associated with natural objects (e.g. rocks, springs or trees) more often than with mythological human-like

characters. Beside ideas borrowed from Buddhism and Chinese culture, the Japanese world is full of indistinct spirits rather than clear divine figures.

In short, the universe as it is takes precedence over any deities, which are at most concurrent with the world and not anterior to it. There is basically no transcendence in this worldview.

Immanent reality

Ultimate reality is then not to be found in another realm, but in our ordinary, common-sense world. This world is the real one, and no other (although we might be deluded about its import or significance). In other words, reality is immanent in our world, and it is to be found ultimately in our everyday experience of life. Any philosophical enquiry should start from ordinary experience, not from abstract notions (this can be compared with 20th century Western phenomenology).

This viewpoint is consistent with the vague and impersonal character of Eastern conceptions of divinity. If reality is immanent in the world, any divinity is to be experienced in this world as conjoined with it, not standing apart from it. The Taoist Way is to be found everywhere and anywhere in our world ("even in piss and dung"), and in Buddhist terms, the same can be said of Buddha-nature (i.e. the ultimate reality).

Still, because the Way is ineffable, it may be also interpreted as a kind of transcendence that cannot be expressed in human words, leading to various forms of mysticism (notably in Taoism and Zen Buddhism). The Way (*dao* 道) can thus be found *in* this world, but it is nevertheless not *of* this world (possibly to be seen as the flow or form of our everyday world).

Basic undifferentiation

Fundamental reality is also undifferentiated. All the ordinary distinctions to be found in human language (between objects, qualities and values) are basically unsound: they are either illusory, or temporary or relative to context (or all of these). There is a lot of variation on this issue between different authors and schools of thought. Some Taoist authors such as Zhuangzi tend toward skepticism and relativism, while Laozi and Buddhist thinkers are even more radical in their critique of any intellectual discourse concerning reality.

Buddhist philosophy in particular has developed a systematic and relentless attack on the very notion of substance (anticipating by centuries recent developments in Western thought). Entities

are neither distinct nor separate nor stable, and the individual self (the ego) is itself an illusion. The motivations for this view are primarily soteriological (to help believers find salvation by showing them the vanity of all attachments) but it became an important part of Eastern thought.

What these different schools of thought have in common is a general view of ultimate reality as a kind of undifferentiated background, out of which ordinary distinctions may arise and be used on a temporary basis according to context and needs. As reality is also dynamic and constantly changing, any clear-cut linguistic description is eventually a fool's game, and the sage should always be ready to let go of preconceived distinctions.

This neutral background is often described (rather misleadingly) as nothingness or emptiness (*wu* 無, *mu* in Japanese), out of which differentiated being (*you* 有) will arise. This background can also be identified with the Taoist Way (*dao* 道). Later on (during the Sung dynasty), it was further reinterpreted by Neo-Confucians as a kind of basic energy (*qi* 氣).

There is a recurring ambiguity, however, as to whether differentiated things are real, or only in the mind of the observer. In Western terms, there appears to be a vacillation between realism and idealism, but Eastern thinkers decline to take positions in such terms (because the mind is not seen as a separate substance, distinct from matter). Most classical oppositions of Western philosophy (mind-matter, mind-body, matter-form, etc.) are in fact basically inadequate to account for Eastern conceptions.

A holistic world

Things and events are not only devoid of a stable, separate identity, they are also regularly dependent on other events in the world. This is a holistic position: the whole is more than the sum of its parts, and mere analysis into parts would miss the crucial relational nature of phenomena. Holism is not unheard of in the modern West (from Spinoza to Hegel) but it has always been a minority position, whereas it is the default mode in Eastern thought.

Such holism is associated with an emphasis on influence at a distance, rather than the mechanical causality by direct contact that is typical of classical Western science. The Chinese started work on magnetism long before the Renaissance (they invented the compass) and they have always seen the universe as a web of correspondences, where correlated things, events or categories naturally influence each other. Chinese medicine for example is based on a systematic catalog of correspondences within the body and between body and world. Similar ideas were to

be found in medieval Europe, but they later gave way to the analytical, mechanical outlook of classical science.

Social consequences of Eastern worldview

This Eastern worldview has had notable consequences for cultural developments and social life. There is a basic distrust of formal descriptions and explicit laws of any kind; general principles to be adapted to circumstances are preferred instead. Flexibility and adaptability are more highly valued than the rigid observance of precise regulations. Social rituals are important to reinforce social cohesion (this is an important tenet of Confucianism), but they are flexible social customs, not dogmatic commandments.

This mixture of flexibility and social cohesion, associated with personal moral discipline and great respect for learning (typical Confucian values), was probably favorable to modernization and industrial development in the Far East. After initial difficulties (especially in China) Far-Eastern countries are now advanced economies (except for Vietnam so far).

The dynamic character of the Eastern universe, the emphasis on process rather than substance is also conducive to widespread flexibility, since nothing is fixed or permanent. It makes sense to "go with the flow", to adapt nimbly to a changing world rather than to stick blindly to one's guns.

The distrust of formal rules goes together with a stress on spontaneity and intuition. As the world evolves by itself without external guidance, so should men act spontaneously, following their instinct as much as possible. This is not as simplistic as it may sound, because correct spontaneous action is often assured by long and rigorous training (in calligraphy, painting or swordsmanship for example). Spontaneity is the ideal, but within a strict social framework!

The emphasis on spontaneous action is associated with the oft-mentioned theme of non-action (*wuwei* 無為). In fact, purposeless, effortless action (as exhibited by a highly-trained craftsman for example) would be a better translation than "non-action", but this is certainly an important notion in Chinese culture.

This basic flexibility is associated with a moral tolerance that is a far cry from the rigid dogmatism of Biblical culture. Conflicts for power in Eastern history have been just as violent and cruel as anywhere else, but Easterners usually do not fight over religious dogmas: they just don't think that God's truth is unique and worth enforcing. They find it perfectly acceptable to worship different deities at the same time (after all it's only prudent to hedge one's bets).

Lastly, mankind does not have a special place in the Eastern universe. The social world is part of the natural world, and human society belongs to the physical realm. No special moral rules apply to mankind, and social customs belong to the natural order of things. Neither is mankind alienated from nature: on the contrary Easterners are very much at home in this universe and delight in their appreciation of natural landscapes. The love of nature has always been a major theme in Eastern literature, poetry and painting, and has inspired the best works of art.

Of course, things are not so simple or so clear-cut. The long history of the Far East has also been remarkably diverse in space and time, and has integrated many external influences. But this succinct outline should be a reasonable introduction to a complex culture.

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