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About the modernistic aspects of antique and renaissance morals

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MORALITY: *TO WHAT ENDS IN MODERN TIMES?*

About the modernistic aspects of antique and renaissance morals

Student: Ralph Wallenborn

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0. Introduction and definition of the problem

In modern times, there seems to be a strict division between personal and public life. In ancient Greece, it seemed to be the other way around: only citizens who were able to act as 'good men' could also be responsible citizens. Michel Foucault has described this in his seminar cycle *Hermeneutics of the self*[1], where he examines the life of a Greek Prince, Alcibiades, who is not ready for state affairs, because he has not yet attained the just balance in his self-control. Self-control was considered as a condition for strong leadership.

With Plato and Aristotle we see a kind of 'ontological morality', which is based upon the thought that there is some kind of predisposition in one's nature and that it is possible to adjust one's moral behavior to that more or less fixed 'nature'. In Hellenism, we see a shift to the practical aspect of moral philosophy: practical wisdom gets in reach for everyone, unless one is unable to use his rational faculties.

In the Renaissance, morality is placed in a context of Christian faith – in which religion is a binding factor, but not always the most important one. Since the enlightenment, there has been a radical shift towards the liberation of the *Self*. Though it seems that the emancipation of the modern citizen and his proclaimed self-liberation turned into narcissism; no one wants to be responsible for the shared values in society, since we all have to live up to our own high standards. Leading a good life has become a burden, rather than a tribute to the freedom of choice, as for example in Immanuel Kant's moral system.

At first – in the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century – personal beliefs were still embedded in political and somewhat dogmatic positions like communism and fascism. Nowadays, we see no binding factor in morality, due to the fact that as a result of globalization financial and economic markets have become more important than a general sense of morality. On the other hand, it would be too easy to state that this could be the only reason for a shattered 'intelligible' morality, there are after all no mono-causal explanations for this development towards secularization and individualization in western (and some non-western) societies.[2]

In this paper, I want to show that the emancipation of the *Self* did not just start in the eighteenth century with the enlightenment, but earlier – even in Hellenism. Basically, my research revolves around the question, to what extent moral standards still have a binding nature; are they useful to let people participate, because they appeal to a personal sense of morality, or are they solely based upon an alleged *sensus communis*?

[1] Michel Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the subject*, Picador New York, 2005, first chapter. The text, to which Foucault refers to, is a Socratic dialogue (also known as *Alcibiades I*) and it is not proven that it really written by Plato.

[2] Even in the 18th century J.J. Rousseau warned against the dangers of upcoming modern society, in which there could be an incongruent proportion between personal and public interest.

And above that: what did morality mean in Renaissance culture for the individual? Was Jacob Burckhardt right when he interlinked greater political freedom in the Italian cities to a greater personal freedom?[3]

The course of history seems to endorse Burckhardt's hypothesis. For example humanism and reformation could be seen as an attempt to free oneself from the chains of an overloaded Christian morality, which was Platonic in its nature, as well as 'ontological'[4]. No proof is indeed needed, when you suppose there is a God who has created life and gave mankind clear guidelines how to live.

I want to conclude this introduction by repeating the main questions: what is 'modernistic' in the different ways of thinking about morality that we will investigate? With 'modernistic' I mean the tendencies that could turn into narcissism and indifference in our times. And what are the cleavages in respect to a shared morality? These will be the most important questions of my essay. I want to show the oscillation between the private moral demands and the public requirements in order to be a good citizen. I will discuss some philosophical schools concerning these questions in a chronological view, and methodologically, I want to compare every time two succeeding positions with each other. Every paragraph contains a summary of the described ways of thinking with respect to the questions stated above.

I. Morality in ancient times

1.1 Plato and Aristotle

Although Plato has been the most read and quoted philosopher from ancient Greece, as Whitehead stated[5], his work is also anti-democratic in a modern sense with regard to personal freedom. Gerard Koolschijn, a Dutch author, published a book with the revealing title *Plato, the attack on democracy*[6], in which he tries to expose the dark side of Plato's moral beliefs, resulting in an anti-democratic political view. It would exceed the limited space I have, to give an extensive description of Koolschijn's arguments, but I would like to discuss one of them, which he uses to describe Plato's view on ideal leadership, because it will be very useful to illustrate the role of intellect and wisdom in a personal and thus political sense. It shows that personal morality for Plato is always intertwined with an extrapolation on a higher level, the polis is merely a reflection of the individual's state of being. About the role of the wrong (democratic) politicians in ancient Greece Koolschijn writes: "With desire as bait, they hunt for stupidity to enrich themselves".[7] And in another instance: "The ideal, rational society starts to degenerate, when by mistake (…) the wrong

[3] He did this in *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860).
[4] Again, I use this term only as a reference to the alleged 'natural' status of morals; morality has always been seen as a part of a natural (and according to Plato and in the Renaissance: higher) order.
[5] Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) wrote about Plato: "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato" (*Process and Reality*, Free Press New York, 1979, p.39).
[6] Gerard Koolschijn, *De aanval op de democratie*, Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep Amsterdam, 2005.
[7] Ibd., p. 35.

people are selected for the education that gives access to political functions. The silver people, who by that mistake will share in the power, want to compensate their own lack of mental gold by introducing also for the leading class private property, and that is the beginning of all misery. The ideal state was based upon a division of political and economic interest. When that foundation disappears, no decent political building can rise. Within the reigning group will sprout disagreement, which leads to compromises, whereby private possession is allowed. Many rational people will lose their purity."[8]

Plato's rational division of society overrules personal interest, but on the other hand it excludes large masses of people, who will not be allowed in political functions. The tri-partition of the soul is directly converted into a divided society; the latter must be led by intellectual motives and not by personal interest.[9] In opposition to these anti-democratic tendencies, there is a strong plea for a greater good: the individual must uphold an ideal greater than what is good for him personally. And the tool for that utopia is reason.[10]

Another important feature of Plato's worldview is the constant training of the rational people, who are determined by nature and nurture to lead the state, which is a reference to the philosopher-kings, because they are able to make the difference between wrong and right. For Plato the Good, the True and the Beautiful are interlinked with each other and are stereotypes which serve as an axiomatic pattern for the best leadership possible.

Within the scope of this work, we can conclude that Plato uses imperative demands for the subject: the individual must comply to the needs of his nature and upbringing. *De facto*, this means that there is a binding morality, which excludes a moment of choice; the private persona is always seen as a chain in a social web of determined roles or functions. Morality is linked to reason and reason itself has merely a functional meaning: it can produce the truth and wisdom, that are necessary to lead the state in a just way. The citizen is like a bee in a beehive, in which every bee has its own function and meaning.[11] Rationality for the individual has the same structure as the preferred rationalized social system. To achieve this, the state must be divided in three categories: the counsellors (the philosophers as the rational principle), the traders (which is the desire) and the auxiliaries (an equivalent of the noble spirit or passion). By determining these social roles or functions, the state can be ruled by the same natural order, that applies for the individual's wellbeing. The moral *sensus communis* in Plato's view is a social one.

[8] Ibd., p.84.
[9] Plato, *Republic* 434 c – 445 b, p.1.
[10] Koolschijn's argument can also be read in another way, because in his description of the ideal state, there is a resemblance to Marx' perfect society in the refusal of private property in combination with political power. The difference is that Marx strives for no property at all, whereas Plato declines the mixture of political and economic power.
[11] This platonic metaphor is also used by St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) in his essay *On Kingship*.

Plato's spiritual descendant, Aristotle, introduces another form of morality which lacks the transitional component of his mentor. The Platonic ideas are replaced by a mainly naturalistic point of view: a good man is characterized rather by his actions than by his rationality.[12] On the other hand, the actions of men must be *rational* to be 'good'. What is considered 'good' is placed in a context, the context of one's nature and development. Essential meanings seem to be 'fluent' in Aristotle's practical moral philosophy. A similarity to Plato's moral system is the ontological claim for moral behavior which is based upon a person's nature and predisposition. But in Aristotle's view, this is not automatically linked to social status but to individual temperament and virtue.

In Aristotle's anthropology, there is one common aspect for all human beings, which is their rationality. On the other hand, no conclusions can be drawn from this 'sameness'. To see the essence of things (and of men), we have to separate them. As Aristotle says, no general statements can be made about individual facts. He also emphasizes the dynamic nature of human kind: becoming a better man includes the possibility of *change* as a major cause of human action, in finding a perfect equilibrium in the human faculties. Aristotle defines a dynamic ethics which can only be generalized in types of different virtues.[13]

The naturalistic elements of Aristotle's writings are in a certain way still a dedication to his mentor, Plato. Because the function of nature is ambivalent in Aristotle's ethics, he makes a difference between 'pleasures' (not natural) and ' noble activities' (natural). Here again, there is a difference between what we want according to our own nature and the things beyond that nature. Life is not about adventure, it is about exploring what best fits one's nature. So we have to recognize our own vices (nature) to become better men, but in the process of perfecting one's nature a choice has to been made. This can or must even go against our nature. Nature is here in an odd way equivalent to rationality, to the capability of developing an insight in one's own shortcomings. Man is an 'animal rationale'.

Similar to Plato, Aristotle founded his morality on the idea of *functionality.* The functionality is individualized but it still involves the thought that there is a coherence between individual behavior and what is needed in general. Contemplation is a means to recognize the true meaning of life. For the truth, we do not need anything other than the truth itself. Just like happiness, truth has no further end. Furthermore, truth brings us closer to the Gods.[14] In contemplation, no contradiction seems allowed (because everything is perfect). There are no antinomies in happiness and contemplation. The following quote about justness and temperateness in the *Ethica Nicomachea* is an illustration of the closeness of Aristotle to Plato as well as for their difference: "(…) in the first place he (the wise man, the auth.) must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character. These are not

[12] Aristotle, Fragments from *Ethica Nicomachea*, p.3.
[13] Ibd.
[14] Ibd., p. 12.

reckoned as in conditions of the possessions of the arts, except the bare knowledge; but as a condition of the possession of the virtues, knowledge has little or no weight, while the other conditions count not for a little but for everything, i.e. the very conditions which result from often doing just and temperate acts."[15]

1.2 Summary

It seems that Plato's and Aristotle's ways of thinking have similarities regarding the social impact of their ideas about morality; for both it is important to offer the right means for a better society. In Plato's view, society must be structured according to rational principles which overrule economic interest or personal needs. Aristotle's rationality revolves around the question, in how far we are able to fine-tune our personal 'set of capacities'. As a matter of fact, the latter uses a far more *personalized* concept of what is considered 'rational'. It is not only about gaining knowledge about us and the world *through ideas*, but on the basis of *praxis*: we find also knowledge in our deeds. In Aristotle's concept, perfecting oneself is a way to contribute to a better society.

This important difference involves their conception of 'happiness': the highest happiness in Plato's moral beliefs is abstract, it is centered on the capability of getting access to eternal ideas. Aristotle considers *Eudaimonia* a goal in itself, without the link to a reality above the physical world. In a way, an abstract ideal of goodness has been 'materialized' within two philosophic generations. However, any person has to obey certain rules in private life to be able to be a good citizen, the *Self* is always regarded being part of a greater 'good'.

[15] Ibd., p. 6.

1.3 Stoicism and Epicureanism

The keywords in of the stoic Epictetus[16] are self-control and temperance. Rationality in the (Hellenistic) Stoic tradition is converted into a generalized and universal notion of what 'the good' means without the idealistic characteristics of Platonism. While individual actions are more or less based upon the free will in the classic Platonic and Aristotelian view, for the Stoics everything is governed by the Gods, necessary as well as contingent actions and incidents. The Stoics live by strict rules they have to live up to. For the desired tranquility, they strive for a kind of mental transformation. Rationality is rather a tool than a goal[17] as this following fragment shows: "With regard to whatever objects give you delight, are useful, or are deeply loved, remember to tell yourself of what general nature they are, beginning from the most insignificant things. If, for example, you are fond of a specific ceramic cup, remind yourself that it is only ceramic cups in general of which you are fond. Then, if it breaks, you will not be disturbed. If you kiss your child, or your wife, say that you only kiss things which are human, and thus you will not be disturbed if either of them dies."[18]

The way to attain the proclaimed mental transformation is to get detached from concrete objects of desire. Epictetus lays a strong emphasis on an *amor fati*, a kind of mental attitude by means of which you can give a reversed meaning to things happening. Peace of mind is more important than misfortune, the only thing one can control is one's own emotions in order to put things that occur in another perspective. Methodologically, Epictetus represents a radical position about the just way to behave in every situation by laying stress on the relativity of the occurrence for the individual. Things around us do not give us the tools to change the course of life, which is why we have to change ourselves.

Achieving a mental equilibrium becomes a goal in itself and the effort to attain *apatheia* creates a great distance between the individual and the outer world.[19] Plato's and Aristotle's notions are being vulgarized, because detachment of the surrounding objects and events seem reachable for everyone. No distinction is made between individuals: the practice of leading a good life does not depend on individual qualities but on the way you are able to adjust your personal emotions. Human enhancement is a matter of training. Wisdom is rather a means for keeping yourself on the right path, with the intention to create stability and a virtuous mind.

[16] Epictetus, *Euchiridion*, translation by Elizabeth Carter.
[17] Or in the words of Seneca: "The body should be treated more rigorously, that it may not be disobedient to the mind." From: *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, letter 8.
[18] Epictetus, *Euchiridion*, p. 1 and 2.
[19] Although it would go too far to presume that *apatheia* means a total disconnection with the outer world or that it would exclude happiness in everyday life; feeling happiness is not the problem, but the attachment to that particular feeling.

A totally different view on the relationship between personal life and public engagement can be found in Epicurus, who does not give any transparent clues about what should be considered 'good' or 'evil'. His main argument for moral behavior lies in the thought that "all good and bad consists in sense-experience".[20] At first sight, this is a difference that contrast with all other philosophical schools. Since rationality seems to be banned.[21] The result of this materialistic view is an absolute emphasis on the direct consequences of our behavior and the relative attachment to the momentum, as everything is considered contingent and changing. There seems no escape from reality possible, but in a dialectic relationship with that reality, one can feel happy: "For we are in need of pleasure only when we are in pain because of the absence of pleasure, and when we are not in pain, then we no longer need pleasure."[22] Seeing the relativity of things is a similarity with Stoic philosophy[23], the emphasis on practical wisdom (ethos) as well.

There is, however, also an important difference. Hedonism in Epicurus' terms must be understood as a dialectic interaction between body and mind and not the suppression of bodily sensations by reason. Epicurus' vision is about the balance between body and soul. Michel Onfray, a modern French philosopher, is writing an anti-history of European philosophy (which in his understanding is considered as a dominant Platonic tradition) and he describes Epicurus as a Nietzschean avant la lettre. About the reaction on Epicureanism in ancient and modern times he says: "The anti-hedonism shows a symptomatic self-hate, that is being concentrated, transfigured, replaced, reversed and eventually focused on a delusion in which all the negativity within a person comes together: pleasure."[24]

The combination of reasoning and acknowledging sense-data at the same time are, in a way, a personalized form of utilitarianism; it is not about what is best for all, but what is best for the individual. The *sensus communis* represented by an overruling rational principle is missing - except if we accept the thought that a happy individual could contribute more to society than an unhappy one, and that happiness can only be achieved by appreciation of the body. The similarity with modern utilitarianism lies in the method of reaching happiness (absence of pain), which is really hedonistic: "It is, however, appropriate to make all these decisions by comparative measurement and an examination of the advantages and disadvantages."[25] Hellenistic hedonism revolves around just measurement (temperance) and does not extinguish rationality, as it does in our modern understanding of a hedonistic lifestyle.

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[20] Epicure, *Letter to Menoikeus*, 10.124. In the same sentence Epicure condemns the preoccupation with death, because death is the "privation of sense-experience" (Ibd.).

[21] Only seems to been banned, because Epicure is very clear about the fact that rationality is a binding factor between the body and soul; a wise man knows that it is all about quality in life and not about quantity.

[22] Epicure, *Letter to Menoikeus*, 10.128.

[23] Seneca quotes even an ironical passage of Epicure to clarify the lack of freedom in a man's life: "If you would enjoy real freedom, you must be the slave of Philosophy." From: *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, Letter 8.

[24] Michel Onfray, *Antieke wijsgeren, tegengeschiedenis van de filosofie*, Mets & Schilts Amsterdam, 2007. The French edition is published in 2006 by Édition Grasset & Fasquelle.

[25] Epicure, *Letter to Menoikeus*, 10.130.

1.4 Summary

The main difference between Stoicism and Epicureanism is the way, in which happiness can be achieved. The Stoics demand a clear division of ratio and emotions; the main goal is not happiness itself, but total detachment of the contingent outer world. Feelings are not denied, but they are generalized. The Epicureans seek personal happiness, which is achievable by getting grip on the occurrence of bodily sensations. The indicator for living properly is the ideal of leading a happy life. Both schools tend to tone down the importance of social life: the Stoics by putting things in a wider perspective and by believing in the power of fate; the Epicureans by laying stress on individual needs. Modesty seems to be the keyword in these Hellenistic traditions. Being a good citizen can only be attained by structural self-enhancement. However, the Epicurean tradition tends to stimulate a retraction from society in the greater appreciation of personal consent. While Stoics zoom out on materialistic sensations to achieve *apatheia*, the Epicureans zoom in on one's individual demands.

1.5 Eclecticism and Scepticism

In a certain way the eclectic philosophy, as we find it in Cicero, also has a naturalistic tendency because he sometimes uses the same arguments as the Epicurean school. He reminds us for example that the *summum bonum* is part of our nature because we are attached to things around us. The reason for this attachment according to Cicero lies in the love we have for ourselves in order to know what is good for us. Against the Stoics Cicero argues that human nature is neglected in their philosophy and he pleads for a common sense moral philosophy that equally incorporates body and mind.[26] On the other hand, morality is not a fixed human attribute, a *status quo*, but something which is changing and improving, and with the use of reason man can develop himself onto a higher level.

This last aim seems to be Aristotelian in its intention, what needed is the right balance between body and soul: "Thus the *ultimate End* of all Affections, when traced from the common Source of Nature, arises by many Gradations before it arrives at its *Perfection*, which *Perfection* consists in *Health of Body* and the *Perfection of the rational Faculties*."[27] Cicero's ethics revolves around the notion of nature and evolution (in an anthropological sense). Knowing yourself is the main key for acknowledging and developing your virtues.[28] Accordingly, the main aspect in Stoic philosophy, i.e. reasoning, is more important for attaining this goal than being bound to a particular human nature. Cicero combines human virtue with the concept of *honestas* which represents a "prudent, temperate, brave and equitable System of civil Polity (…)."[29]

[26] Cicero, *On Ends*, p. 195.
[27] Ibd., p. 253.
[28] Ibd., p. 256.
[29] Ibd., p. 264.

Reason is still the most important motive for Cicero, although it seems purely functional and is needed only to secure a personal development. This intrinsic motive can result in good citizenship because it may evoke sympathy (extrinsic motive).

The most modern view on morality, as I believe, can be found in the texts of the Skeptics. A general notion of the 'good' is automatically linked to a 'web of beliefs'; there is no absolute 'good', it is always relative.[30] As Sextus Empiricus points out, the conflicting theories about morals show that there cannot be a right way of living or believing in a transcendental being, because there are different conceptions about God in the various religions.[31] Good or bad is not in the nature of things, it is purely an attributive statement about them. Propositional definitions always depend on the point of view of the beholder: you only *believe* that something is wrong or right. On first sight the 'suspension of judgment' in the skeptic position leads to a plurality of values and norms. Sextus Empiricus rejects all dogmatist views on morality since these are merely expressions of hope instead of being based on a true understanding of reality. However, the recommended suspension of judgment serves the same end: tranquility of mind. It requires lessons in doubt and training to prevent being convinced by dogmatic positions.

To achieve this state of *ataraxia* the role of reason as a guideline for moral behavior is being surpassed by methodical doubt. Reason is presented as a form of forged opinion and the skeptic position turns into an anti-philosophy by avoiding ontological axioma as well as first principles in moral philosophy. Ironically enough, the anti-Platonic elements of skepticism are also rooted in the teachings of Socrates, since he also tried to avoid firm statements and beliefs about the true nature of reality (Socratic irony).

1.6 Summary

Whereas Cicero pleads for a notion of *common sense*, Sextus Empiricus is convinced of privation of any belief on the basis of religious or philosophical tradition. The similarity between the two positions seem to be their doubt. But Cicero's common sense theory – equilibrium between body and mind – is not to uphold in Sextus Empriricus' view: no rational founding on universal moral grounds is possible. In the eclectic point of view, rationality is mainly a means to attain a balanced personality. *Honestas* is a way of life, which is characterized by awareness of yourself, also regarding the social network of which you are part of. However, the Skeptics overthrow this social aspect of morality by denying any ground for a shared morality. Methodic doubt is the basis for their moral beliefs, which results in judgments without preconceived opinions. As a result, no hierarchy can be made in the different forms of social interaction: pragmatism in the different ways of living overrules a shared morality.

[30] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of skepticism,* Cambridge University Press Cambridge, 2004, book I, 148. The expression 'web of beliefs' is originally used (in another context) by the Italian economist and philosopher Vifredo Pareto (1848-1923).
[31] Ibd., book III, 18 and 19.

II. Renaissance authors

2.1 The adaptation of Plato and Aristotle in the Renaissance

In the Renaissance, Platonism became part of the Christian belief in a higher form of reality, which was the kingdom of God. Not only the philosophers could be transformed into 'godlike' beings, this aim was now the goal for every man. But wisdom was therefore translated into faithfulness, into believing in God. For Pico, this results in the idea that we can reach immediate access to the world as a whole, that we can transcend ourselves as mortal beings. In fact, the purification of the soul is seen as a key to eternal life, to a world beyond our physical experience ("Epopteia"). The Platonic tripartition of the soul can be related to the three prescripts at the Delphi oracle: *meden agan, gnothi seauton* and *ei.* The desires must be tempered (*meden agan*) by means of the rationality (*gnothi seauton*) to be able to transcend to a whole being (*ei*).[32]

Philosophy in this perspective is getting popularised, it became a resource to achieve a greater sense of morality. We can attain the highest form of mental ecstasy by controlling our passions (moral philosophy); in order to do this, we have to use dialectic reasoning. This results in a purified soul, a spirit that is able to experience God in all things around. Not the visible world is then the measure of our perception, but the purified soul as a mediator to a higher form of existence.

Where Pico does not make a distinction between the wiser (=the good and just) men and the masses who are born to serve, Erasmus has another perspective. Erasmus' *Praise of the Folly* can be read as a critical anthology of the old and new testament, in which he shows the contrast between man's imperfect nature and the perfect nature of God. Jesus as the good shepherd is interpreted as a role model for mankind, who are depicted as a bunch of fools; on the other hand, man's imperfection can be seen as the key to redemption (in comparison with the story of David and Jesus' crucifixion). Erasmus points out the notion that man's soul is bound to earth by his body, just as in the Platonic interpretation of the imperfect soul. And from this point of view, death is a mere transition to a higher form of being. In his anthropology Erasmus distinguishes between the dumb crowd and a few pious spirits; these are able to ignore the 'affections of the soul', because they will see the reflection of a higher soul in everyone and everything. For these wiser men, everything in life has a higher meaning and cannot be reduced to a physical experience (representation).

Even though Erasmus has a firm judgment about uneducated people, in his opinion the pious ones are more foolish than common men. But here he introduces two kinds of foolishness: the first is the foolishness of heart, which includes the weakness of the flesh; the other one is foolishness of the mind, which is only an anticipation of the promises of a better world, for which other rules apply than for the world we live in.

[32] Pico, *Oration on the dignity of man*, p.2.

The pious person chooses sublimation above the 'affections of the soul'. And at this point Erasmus equips Plato's ideal man (the philosopher) with an ironic furnish. The message is that everything in this earthly life is idle; the Platonic idea prevails.

Aristotle has been more difficult to adapt in Renaissance culture. The main reason for this problem lies in the personalized way he reinterprets the thought of the good, in a different way than the fixed principles of Plato's transcendent morality. His claim for a personalized moral conduct is used to stress the importance of good behavior for everyone, not only the few who have access to a greater wisdom. For Piccolomini, human action is not 'good' or 'bad' in itself (except in the case of murder, adultery, etc.). In this context, the more theological aspect of the good (represented by '*makarismos*'[33]) has an absolute character. It is the idealistic transformation of a perfect good. Philosophy gives practical advice for reaching a higher – and thus religious – level.

Another interpretation of Aristotle can be found in Walaeus, who anachronistically blames Aristotle for not having acknowledged the Christian truth about God and his ten commandments and especially the reward for a good life, viz. the heavenly afterlife. The tenth commandment forbids us to envy another man's possessions, which could cause passions that are forbidden in Christian theology, such as feelings of revenge. Walaeus connects morality with repression of emotions.[34] In his interpretation, Plato is better suited to Christian morality. Walaeus thinks that Aristotle opens the door for passions with his emphasis on the differences in human temperament. He forgets the attempt to stress the importance of knowledge about the passions in order to control them.

In fact Walaeus' attack on Aristotle is founded in the rejection of the concept of *eudaimonia.* Human happiness should not depend on *personal* happiness (according to Aristotle happiness in itself is good) but is related to the notion of an afterlife. Perfect happiness is only a matter of faith: 'cleansing the heart by faith'[35]. So for being a better man, you might need some moral standards, like happiness, but they are not interpreted as the ultimate end of morality. Happiness is only one step of the ladder. In Waleaus' concept, the human will is free in its singular actions (just as in Aristotle's view). On the other hand, this is only a restricted freedom, because one must live a life aiming for a place in heaven. The concept of freedom (what happens contingently) is at this point also linked to a higher form of freedom. The 'residual freedom' or 'natural freedom' that men possess must ultimately be transformed into 'spiritual' or 'supernatural' freedom. In the context of the Renaissance, morality is always bound to the demands of Christian eschatology.

[33] Contemplation by acknowledging a 'higher' form of truth in the principle of *makarismos*.

[34] Walaeus, *Compendium of Aristotelian Ethics*, p. 2.
[35] Walaeus quotes Peter in *Acts 15(:9)*, p. 5.

2.2 Summary

It is clear, however, that in Renaissance thought the Platonic ideal of a spiritual life is reinterpreted in a way that the afterlife is glorified by the notion of a heavenly reward. A good life – which is cleansed from passion and desire – can be a ticket to heaven. Sublimation is the keyword for the classic Platonic discourse as well for Renaissance philosophies influenced by Plato. Morality shows an odd ambiguity: it is only earthbound by denying the superficial sides of earthly life. What is considered as 'good' represents a mere transitional value. As we are looking for the essence of life, and all around us must be seen in the light of its essential meaning, this kind of morality claims to be universal and of all times. It is an elitist point of view that relies on the idea of a natural order of things.

In the Renaissance, Aristotle's more naturalistic view finds more resistance than Plato's idealistic approach. 'Good' or 'bad' are not immanently linked to a definite truth, but must be seen in the light of one's nature and actions. In a way, this can be seen as a very modernistic kind of morality, because of the personalization of what is considered 'good' or 'bad'. There actually seems to be a claim for taking personal responsibility, if one is a *zoon politicon* for whom rationality is internalized and fine-tuned.

2.3 Stoicism and Epicureanism in the Renaissance

In the case of Joost Lips (or Lipsius) the stoic dualism between body and soul is even intensified because not only is reason here considered a divine instrument, but the role of fate also changes and is being fortified. Lipsius discriminates two kinds of 'agents' in mankind: the first is reason, which belongs to the dimension of the soul (a reflection of God[36]). The second is 'opinion', which is seen as the bodily and thus dangerous counterpart of reason. In the classic stoic tradition, desires are denied and rationalized, and for Lipsius they become a threat for man's soul. The soul with its divine offspring is constantly "lamentably corrupted and infected, with the stain of the Body, and the contagion of the Senses".[37] In this sense, God becomes a metaphor for reason, which leads to even a much stronger rejection of the body.[38]

[36] This notion is not new, since also Plato and Aristotle call reason a divine principle. Lipsius quotes Seneca at this point, who proclaims "as a part of divine spirit infused into Man." From: Justus Lipsius, *De Constantia in publicis malis*, chapter 5 (translation by Nathaniel Wanley, Redmayne and Allestry London, 1670).

[37] Ibd.

[38] The strong aversion to the *hic et nunc* (the sense-data) can also be explained by the torments of the war between the northern and the southern part of the Netherlands (1568-1648). In his essay Lipsius uses often phrases that are typical for the baroque period, such as: "What are you? A Man, a Shaddow, Dust". From: Justus Lipsius, *De Constantia in publicis malis*, chapter 14.

Fate also receives a new dimension, because Lipsius interprets the notion of a higher order (= the things that are naturally not in our control) as a form of divine *providence*, which can be considered as a denaturalization of the Hellenistic *fatum*-concept. Acceptance of one's fate is now linked to the Christian idea of sin: really sinful is the ignorance of the rational principle, which is reckoned as the only tool for accepting one's fate. The small element of choice in classic Stoicism (one must choose to use one's rational abilities) is simply overruled by the notion of Christian providence: "We are born in a Kingdom, and to obey God is Liberty itself."[39] Here, there seems to arise a paradox because only in the privation of freedom lies real freedom according to Lipsius. Fate has become part of a divine providence that represents God's will and must be obeyed by all means, fate is limited to the course of nature and events as seen from a human perspective.

In Lorenzo Valla's description of Epicureanism, this moral concept is fine-tuned by giving concrete examples of how individual desires relate to general needs. Virtue and *honestas* are placed in a context of relativity of things as he states: "To answer a generic question, personal advantage is defined as that which, in any action, excludes or clearly compensates for the possibility of personal harm."[40] Not the abstract ideal of good actions and a good life seem to prevail but the consequences for the person involved: "Not to flee from battle or abandon one's post is courageous, but to remain when everybody else is fleeing is madness."[41] The context, i.e. the concrete circumstances, must be used as indicator for just behavior. While the Stoic and the Platonic traditions focus on an idealistic concept of morality, Valla stresses the psychological and emotional aspects of social behavior.[42]

In fact the most important lesson, according to Valla, that can be learned is the observation that morals can be derived from our emotions, because we are able to recognize each other's emotions and we can thereby distinguish pains from pleasures.[43] Within the scope of this explanation Epicureanism becomes much more 'social' than its reputation makes it appear to be. The social aspect of Valla's interpretation of the Epicurean heritage is also visible in his re-interpretation of the myth of Gyges.[44] Gyges has taken (stolen) a ring that gives him great power: he can make himself invisible with it. In Plato's *Republic,* this story is told to illuminate the destructive aspects of power that can lead to wrong choices.[45] New in Valla's adaption and re-interpretation of this story is that he refers to the fact that the deception by Gyges was to his own disadvantage. The bad deed was not wrong, because it was known by the Gods and some mortals. Not the corruption linked to his own desire for power is criticized, nor the ruthlessness in the way he uses and misleads others, but the

[39] Ibd.
[40] Lorenzo Valla, *On pleasure*, chapter XV, 3.
[41] Ibd., chapter XV, 4.
[42] So he is convinced of the fact that there is a reciprocity in all human action, loving others will produce the same feeling in return just as fearing and hating others does. From: Ibd., chapter XV and XVI.
[43] In Aristotle's concept of *catharsis* the same principle is meant, when the spectators of a classic tragedy are supposed to cleanse their own emotion by looking at recognizable emotions in the theatre.
[44] Lorenzo Valla, *On pleasure*, chapter XXVI, 1-15.
[45] Plato, *Republic*, 2.359a–2.360d.

mere fact that his behavior could aim against himself (through others: reciprocity) finds no mercy in the eyes of Valla. The life of a king evokes more anxiety and stress than the life of a shepherd, or as Valla puts it: a man who "has no fear of his fellowmen is clearly inhuman"[46].

2.4 Summary

The Stoic claim for living by strict rules, is being placed in the context of Christian religion and interpreted as a means to rule out all evil. Free will is being completely extinguished by the superiority of reason in the Renaissance conception of Stoic philosophy. The body (desire) is seen as the counterpart of the Godlike reason. Only by a far-reaching suppression of one's desires man can live in the light of God. In this perspective, rationality has become an instrument to behave as a 'good Christian', no difference can anymore be made between personal and public life. The original *sensus communis* is covered by Christian notions like 'sin' and 'redemption'.

Michel Onfray's comparison with Nietzsche seems to be meaningful with respect to the following words from Valla about human interaction: "How much more suitable and profitable is my idea of being useful both to him (other human being, the auth.) and to myself?"[47] Fortifying oneself is not shameful when it also includes better relationships with others. Human interaction leads to certain reactions and it is clearly in the advantage for both parties not to mislead or mistreat the other party. Another conclusion that can be drawn is that something that seems to be advantageous can be disadvantageous as well. Just as in classical Epicureanism, there is space for *personal* needs in this form of morality. Something is considered 'good', when it also has a positive effect on the other participants in society. The re-interpretation of Gyges makes clear that indifference regarding public affairs is considered more sinful than the desire to fulfill personal needs.

2.5 Eclecticism and Skepticism in the Renaissance

The argumentative style in Coornhert's treatise *Vande oorsaecke vande Zonde, 'tgetuygh Platonis* (1630) is mainly influenced by Plato's ideas about the eternal value of the Good, the True and the Beautiful. In his understanding, we can and must overcome evil by 'true knowledge'.[48] The classical tripartition of the soul is changed into a distinction between feeling, lust (desire) and reason, in which reason is the part we are naturally longing for. Epicurean notions are used to naturalize the longing for a higher goal, namely to enhance ourselves. Just as in Platonism the concept of 'good' and 'bad' is interlinked with wisdom and knowledge. Bad people are not immanently bad, but because of the fact that they refuse to seek a better way of life, they can be blamed for not making the right choice. The last observation could be easily transferred in our times, in which we find traces of this argument in 20th century's existentialism.

[46] Lorenzo Valla, *On pleasure*, chapter XXVI, 8.
[47] Ibd., chapter XVII, 2.
[48] D.V. Coornhert, *Vande oorsaecke vande Zonde, 'tgetuygh Platonis*, Colom Amsterdam, 134rb.

Religion generally focuses on sin when human defects are being magnified, while Coornhert (like Erasmus) uses philosophical notions to approach human shortcomings with a positive attitude. Moral philosophy can be seen as a way to civilize humanity, the element of 'perfection' as found in Cicero's writings can be understood as attaining mental maturity in order to become a good man. Because of this aim for self enhancement and finding balance between good and bad qualities in order to act righteously, the eclectic vision seems to be related to the *Bildungsideal* from the 18th and mostly 19th century which demands a stringent form of self-reflection – by improving your qualities with knowledge – to become a valuable member of society.

In the classical Skeptic point of view, the superior role of various religions seem to have lost their absolute meaning. Nevertheless, it is peculiar that methodological doubt about general truths can generate one valid truth, at least according to Pierre Charron. Considering all things around us he demands, on the one hand, "a large universal Spirit, open and ready to hear any Thing that shall be offered"[49], on the other hand Charron counterbalances this openness with reference to the importance of "Reasonableness"[50]. Although man has no means to make general statements about "pompous Principles"[51], there is one truth he must accept: "For who (…) hath Power to give Law to our Thoughts, to enslave our Minds, and set up Principles which it shall not be lawful to enquire into, or admit any manner of Doubt concerning them? I can own no such Power in any but God; and he hath it upon the account of his being Truth itself, the Supreme Spirit, and the only Principle and Source of all Things; which makes it as reasonable to believe him upon his bare Word, as it is, not to believe other People barely upon theirs."[52]

In order to integrate the skeptic view in Christian morality, Charron neglects one of the 'tropes' by which means the antique Skeptics deny every general notion of truth: his argument shows a circularity concerning the source of all doubt, since it must be God that equipped us with this faculty of reasonableness (since God is reason and the source of all truth). So reason becomes once again one of the main pillars of the West-European philosophical tradition.[53] Charron and Montaigne also reintroduce reason as a way to make generalizations and to establish a new kind of skepticism: an epistemological skepticism that does not rule out first principles or universal truths.

[49] Pierre Charron, *De la Sagesse,* Fayard Paris 1986, p.612.
[50] Ibd., p.630.
[51] Ibd.
[52] Ibd., p.631.
[53] In a way this line of arguing shows a certain similarities to René Descartes' argumentation, when he tries to prove that methodological doubt is in fact a reasonable doubt. He does this in his *Discourse on the Method* (1637).

2.6 Summary

In the Renaissance, we see a positive interpretation of the Eclectic and Skeptic positions: moral philosophy can be used as a means to enhance yourself. Above all, the philosophical methods are being used in a practical sense and in the light of religious dogmas: leading a better life is always in one's own advantage, since this will result in a place in heaven. Reason in the Eclectic position means structural self-enhancement by correcting the causes of original sin. The Skeptics use rationality only to rule out other possibilities than the Christian eschatology; the appearance of things gives us no clues about their essence, meanings are changing and shifting.

Both schools represent very 'modernistic' tendencies with respect to the main question of this research. The eclectic position elucidates, that only one's personal enhancement can realize social norms, with all the positive connotations provided by Coornhert. The Skeptic perspective rules out any 'last' truths about reality (except the existence of God as creator of the Universe); life is a never ending quest for 'truth', the Skeptics see the dependability of the subject on his method *and thus* the relativity of most insights.

III Morality: to what ends in modern times?

3.1 Some general conclusions

Having done this research, the first and most important conclusion that can be drawn is that there is no coherent concept of morality that has survived the course of history without alterations or additions. All philosophical schools use different angles of seeing things concerning the possibility of having a shared sense of morality. As Michel Onfray has pointed out, there were a lot of perspectives in ancient Greece and Rome, even in the various schools themselves. "As far as I know philosophy does not apply the principles of its sect (…) on itself. Namely, it does not subject the history of its discipline to the crossfire of criticism that is able to give account for the way the work is being written. For what reason does philosophy suspend its own lessons with respect to writing its own history? In whose interest is it to cloak the trade secrets of a uniform corpus? What is hidden behind the will to keep logical reasoning out of the building process of a history of philosophy which is presented as particular, unique, canon-like and objectively, unanimous and irrefutable?"[54]

On the other hand, Onfray claims that the main discourse in western philosophical tradition has wrongly been dominated by a verdict of reason (even in the dialectical counter-movements). In all moral systems, idealistic or materialistic, reason is a recurrent factor in the appliance of the practical aspect of morality. There has been a shift from essential meanings (Plato and in some respects Aristotle) to a concrete and sometimes personalized moral philosophy (in Hellenism) with reason as its main focus. Rationality became more a means than a goal and lost its elitist aspects as an instrument for everyone attainable. In the Renaissance, the divine status of rationality is even fortified, morality is always bound to reason, human enhancement is all about *praxis*. Plato's concept of the soul has become an operative entity in Christendom as it is not only seen as a key to wisdom and true faith but also as a transformable object in order to achieve redemption. Here Platonic elements as well as Hellenistic elements intertwine.

[54] Michel Onfray, *Antieke wijsgeren, tegengeschiedenis van de filosofie*, Mets & Schilts Amsterdam, 2007, p.12.

3.2 The traces of different forms of morality in our times

Concerning our main question, the relationship between personal and public moral behavior, I think we must acknowledge that also in our times traces of the different concepts of moral philosophy can be found. Magnified by the consequences of the enlightenment, the claim for a rational *sensus communis* in public life has only grown. In our times, rational behavior is still considered as 'good', while irrational behavior evokes bad connotations in the public area. Of course, these are generalizations and cannot reflect all the counter-movements and dialectic developments that led to our strongly rationalized western societies. Rationality is strongly bound to the idea of *change*, in a personal as well as in a public sense of morality. 'Changeability' seems to be the modern variant of the classic credo of rationality, in order to be a good citizen. The possibility of change – maybe even the necessity – can be found in all social institutions of Western societies: the economic, the governmental – as well as in personal life.

This organic view is clearly a heritage of Hegel's idealism in which the *Weltgeist* is claimed to materialize in concrete forms in historic reality. History is no longer understood as an accidental course of events, but as a changeable process, in which man plays a crucial part. This insight has been decisive in all the political theories of the 19th and 20th century. The idea of the makeable society can be originated in this thought.

However, what are the traces of the different moral philosophies in modern times?

To begin with Plato, one is tempted to presume, that Plato's original division of economic and political interest is fully guaranteed in our modern Western democracies. De Montesqieu's *trias politica* seemed to be the right means to establish a system that overrules every personal interest on behalf of the majority's wellbeing. Unfortunately, the daily political routine tells another story: all Western democracies support 'bad' regimes (at least financially), even those in which human rights are severely violated. Nowadays, shared moral values are not put aside in the name of obscure oligarchies (as in Plato's days), but in name of economic interest, or to say it cynically: in the best interest of us all. The mantra of personal freedom is the pivot point in modern morality, as a matter of fact our moral understanding is always linked to this constitutional right. Plato's dream of a rational society, without intertwining political and economic motives, has actually failed due to the glorification of our personal freedom. That, what is supposed to be 'rational' is not a goal in itself, i.e. wisdom, but has become part of an economic system. Its nature has become *pragmatic* instead of essential.

The loss of the original Platonic *Utopia* – having access to a 'higher' form of reality – cannot only be explained by the side-effects of secularization in the Western societies. Morality is not anymore a *sensus communis,* that is founded on abstract and metaphysical ideas about reality, but on personal actions and prescriptions of our law. The idea of 'wisdom' has been altered in practical wisdom – except of course in the theological discourses[55] – and has lost its intrinsic (and elitist) meaning. The same thing could be said about the idea of 'happiness', which is no longer a goal in itself, since it has obtained a purely functional meaning. The circumstances leading to certain events have become the main indicator for the qualifications we give to them; morality has become circumstantial. The best example and proof for this thesis is the way in which our law is organized. What is 'good' or 'bad' relies on different circumstances and cannot be reduced to simple statements about general facts.

Aristotle's teaching about a more personalized form of morality – still depending on one's *nature* – seems more appropriate in our times, because of its dynamic character. Modern man would not, in general terms, see wisdom as the main focus for morality, rather he would like to have a pragmatic tool for changing and enhancing himself. Aristotle's stress on the right equilibrium in the development of one's virtues is one of those tools. The makeable society seems only in reach, when its members are able to adjust themselves to a fast changing reality.

In Stoicism as well as in Epicureanism, we see the tendency of a much more practical philosophy; actually, they bear resemblance to each other in wishing the same, viz.: avoiding pain. The Stoics by suppressing attachment to their feelings, and the Epicureans by acknowledging their bodily sensations as a part of human happiness. Generalizing human passions, as the Stoics do in order to overcome them, is, in my opinion, the least modernistic moral attitude; in the 18th century expressions of Romanticism, as we see them represented in all forms of art, we observe evidence of the greater role of individuality in modern society. In this new perception, the personal feelings and the unique became the center of modern man's morality in the last two centuries (linked to the modern concept of freedom). Of course, this kind of moral perception clashes with the moral behavior, that is needed in public life – based on rationality, as I indicated in the beginning of this paragraph.

We can see this shift to *emotions* also in modern psychology, in which the focus lies on healing the dichotomy between body and mind. Rationalization of feelings is considered 'bad', and expressing one's feelings has become part of modern culture and moral behavior. In that sense, the more energetic philosophy of the Epicureans fits more to a modern understanding of morality than the rigid and exclusively 'rational' teachings of the Stoics.

[55] One could speak of vulgarized Platonism in the religious inspired type of governance.

In the common sense morality of the Eclectic position, it is possible to preserve the emotional components, even in any so-called 'rational' behavior. Since self-enhancement revolves around finding a just balance between body and mind, there is no antinomy between the two counterparts anymore (other than in the Stoic position). Perfecting oneself sounds very modern indeed, and the same applies to the notion of changeability. In a certain way, the Eclectic perspective is a personalized version of Hegel's historic idealism. The difference lies in the process, outlined in the two positions: Hegel describes the dialectic evolution in history, whereas the Eclectics stress the importance of personal development. The similarity is the function of rationality: in both positions, real progress is only possible, if the rational principle prevails.

The Skeptic position is also very well traceable in modern moral discourses; firstly, because in our understanding of democracy no binding ideology is accepted anymore as guideline for a *sensus communis.*[56] Secondly, with regard to other cultures and their habits and habituations, we tend to follow the rules of cultural relativism: we may have judgments about other cultures, but it does not seem right to impose our culture upon others or to judge other cultures with our own expectations. The rejection of a universal system of values is also a condition for a fast changing environment, in which adjustment to new situations seem more desirable than a conclusive catalogue of social norms.

3.3 Modern Western societies: a lack of shared morality?

The often criticized narcissistic attitude of modern citizens can be read as a reaction to a strongly regulated society, in which the aspect of personal freedom is emphasized and even politically encouraged. This is perhaps one of the effects of the Enlightenment, and on the other hand of the romantic call for personal freedom and originality; in antique moral philosophy as well as in the Renaissance, the *Self* had to internalize an external morality, it had to adapt ideas from outside to learn moral standards; nowadays – at least in our Western societies, the individual seems to elevate its own moral beliefs, without the necessity to conform them to conventional ideas on the basis of a consensus on morals. Pragmatism seems to be the attitude in moral questions. In public life, the question is no longer, if one's actions are morally justifiable, but if they are acceptable in juridical terms. There are lots of examples in recent history to illustrate this problematic ambiguity[57].

As a consequence of this, a *sensus communis* about morals seems more than ever a utopian aim, which is in clear contradiction to the expectation of acting in a rational manner. The strong claim for political freedom in modern citizenship as a result of the *trias politica,* the fact that there is no political hegemony of religion in daily life anymore and finally the emphasis on self-realization are all in direct opposition to a discourse in which rationality is

[56] Except maybe economic theories, because they are supposed to enable some kind of stability in modern states.

[57] I speak of a ambiguity here, because I believe, that juridical justness is something completely else than 'good' moral behavior. In the examples I have in mind, the involved citizens hide behind their legal immunity.

the main ingredient for moral behavior. Two world wars and the loss of dogmatic beliefs as a result of them, are a further reason for the individualization in modern society. Secularization and globalization have only fed the fragmentation of moral beliefs and have led to an eclectic and skeptic approach of general rules and regulations, as we find it for example in cultural relativism. Morals ground no longer on a shared morality, but on personal beliefs, on private convictions.

The often cited *hedonism* in modern western societies is a byproduct of an economic system, in which desires can be fulfilled if you are willing and able to spend your money on them. The suppression of desires, as we find them in antique philosophy, is no longer valid, the materialization of needs and desires has become a binding factor in our modern understanding of morality. It appears to be that happiness is buyable and has lost its intrinsic value. The 'comparative measurement' in original Epicureanism seems to be vanished. Here, the same problem arises as above: morality is dominated by personal standards, and not by a binding morality.

At last, I would like to repeat the main conclusions: morality has been strongly based upon the notion of rationality, man as an 'animal rationale'. Ancient moral philosophy was strongly influenced by the idea of the thought that one's personal *ethos* had to be shaped and transformed, so that a person could be a valuable member of society. This notion was fortified and functionalized in the Renaissance, when morals became a means for man's redemption. This process of internalization of social norms has been turn around in our times, as it seems. Modern citizens tend to externalize their private conception of morality without seeking legitimate (or rational) grounds for it.

Nevertheless, we live in a strongly rationalized society, in which life is dominated by written and unwritten rules and regulations. Next to that rational component, we find in modern western societies also traces of the hedonistic principle that the needs of the body should not be neglected. This is transformed into a system in which the economic fulfillment of desires are supposed to generate happiness. The modern citizen knows freedom of choice in his moral behavior as long as this freedom does not violate the existing laws. It is not possible to generalize practical morality, since freedom (of choice) is one of the most important features of modern society. The maximization of freedom in modern western societies seems to have led to a minimization of all kinds of commitments and obligations.

Unless men are religious, modern citizenship is primarily characterized by an eclectic and skeptic view on morals.

The heritage of a long tradition of laying stress on rationality, fortified by the political and idealistic consequences of the enlightenment, has led to a situation in which an enormous tension has arisen between personal and public demands. This contradiction seems to characterize modern day's *nihilism*: no claim about morality can be generalized, the public interest is being neglected in favor of personal wellbeing. The concept of freedom has been personalized and has been transfigured in an economic principle. In my belief, the *sensus communis* which was once an idealistic notion to realize a better society has literally materialized in a personal *utopia*.

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