

February 2012

Do not harm others

A simple guideline for a better world

by Dr. Floris van den Berg

Prologue: A plea for Esperanto

In order to be able to communicate with each other, humans need a common language. At international meetings, sometimes there is no common language. Then there is a need for interpreters. Books and documents are translated in many languages. There is a simple solution for the serious problem of communication: a universal language, a lingua franca. Although English is presently the dominant language (though not the language spoken by most people; that is Chinese). But not all people speak English, nor want to speak English. The problem with a (natural) lingua franca is, that it is the language of the most powerful nation in the world. That language is politically laden, and it privileges native speakers. A simple solution has been developed early in the 20th century, namely: to create a simple, logical, easy artificial language. Ludwig Zamenhoff invented one of these artificial languages: Esperanto. If every human earthling learned just one and the same other language besides his or her mother tongue, then everybody could communicate with each other! Translations would only have to be into Esperanto. Esperanto is a living language, which could adopt new vocabulary easily. Philosophically, Esperanto is very pleasing because it is logical, its grammar is simple and without exceptions. A (new) cosmopolitanism would start with a campaign to learn Esperanto worldwide. UNESCO, which is also concerned with Education, is a logical place to work for a world in which all humans can communicate with each other. Cynics remark that the Esperanto project is a failed utopian idea. It might have failed, but when we strive for a better world, spreading Esperanto is an important goal. The Internet makes it easy to spread knowledge of Esperanto. UNESCO and other transnational organization (including the European Union), should promote and stimulate Esperanto.

A Warning: Opening the Chamber of Secrets

Let me warn you. I am going to open the 'Secret Chamber', like in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. Once this door is open and the inconvenient moral truth is known, it cannot be unknown. Philosophy can lead to conclusions one does not like. But philosophy is not about affirming the common opinion, but to find moral blind spots and trying to overcome them. Philosophy is (or should be) about striving for a better world. A world with less suffering and more happiness.

New Humanism: Setting New Priorities

Humanism is a human made worldview and life stance, which is - like science - open for critique and constantly adapting itself to new circumstances.[\[1\]](#) Philosopher Paul Kurtz writes about humanist ethics:

Humanism recognizes that individuals have responsibilities to themselves and to others in society, that we need to develop character, internalize compassion and empathy in our children, and to bring forth their capacity for ethical cognition. In the last analysis it is only by developing new principles relevant to the new age that reason will best serve us.[\[2\]](#)

The most important change in the humanist worldview is the realization in the last decennia, that there is a serious environmental crisis (eco crisis). Humanists have, from the start of this awareness, in 1972 when the “Club of Rome Report The Limits to Growth” was published, been trying to incorporate this into their manifestos and agendas. Generally, they have added care for the environment at the bottom of their agendas and manifestos. However, the environmental crisis endangers our own existence. It is not unlikely that we humans will die out or be decimated due to our ecological near-sightedness. Humanists should turnaround their agendas and re-prioritize putting the environmental crisis at the top. A New Humanism should be a Green Humanism, or eco humanism. In order to be able to live and to celebrate life, humans, and other animals, are dependent on a healthy planet, which supports life. It is a tragic paradox that just when global welfare is boosting, and the world population is growing rapidly, the consequences of human activities are ruining the planet. We have to share this planet and we’d better do our best to make the best of it, for us now and for those coming after us.[\[3\]](#)

In the Neo-Humanist Statement (2011), drafted by Paul Kurtz, there is considerable attention to the eco-crisis, and Kurtz writes that ‘it no longer is the right of anyone and everyone to plunder the richness of nature and to denude its resources. We have an obligation to future generations yet unborn, and a moral responsibility to ecohumanism; namely a loving care and concern for our planet and life on it.’ (p. 32)

A Moral Code for Everyone

In order to be able to live peacefully with each other humans need a minimum common morality.[\[4\]](#) Is there a moral code or rule, which could be shared by all humans on the planet? We humans share the same humanity. As many writers have pointed out, there are common moral decencies.[\[5\]](#) There seem to be large areas of consensus within large cultural and individual differences. Is there a moral ground rule, which could set the basic moral rule of how people should live their lives, or, minimally, within which they can live their life according to their own insight and preferences? This is the project of philosophical ethics: the search for a universal moral code. Among them philosopher Immanuel Kant was very clear that he tried to find rational moral rules which could apply always and everywhere. Kant argued that there are rational moral rules or laws, which are just as certain as Newton’s laws of physics. Kant came up with the categorical imperative that you should always act in such a way that you can make it into a general law, which applies to everyone. For example, if one wants to know if he or she is allowed to lie, according to Kant one has to see if this can be a universal law that everybody is allowed to lie. Obviously it is not possible to have a (decent) society if everybody can lie.

The Harm Principle

Many parents teach their children as a basic moral rule: do not harm others. Sometimes they give as a justifying argument: ‘Imagine that it is you who is harmed. Would you want to be harmed in

that way?' For example when a child harms another child by kicking. Or when the child pulls the tail of the cat. This moral rule was clearly articulated by John Stuart Mill in his book *On Liberty* (1859). In this book Mill starts in the Enlightenment tradition, with the moral axiom of the freedom (liberty) of the individual, namely that the (maximum possible) freedom of the individual is the ultimate moral value. Everyone should be allowed the largest possible freedom, only curtailed by the same freedom of all other individuals. The role of the state, according to Mill, was to secure the freedom of individuals from the infringement of their freedom of those who do not respect the limits of freedom, like thieves, murderers, rapists, and slave owners. In Mill's words:

The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinion of others, to do so would be wise, or even right... The only part of the conduct of anyone, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.

So, Mill argues: anything is allowed, as long as it does not harm others. This moral rule is the ground rule of liberalism. This rule places the onus of justification of the infringement of individual liberty on the person or institution, who wants to limit or harm individual freedom. And, according to Mill, the only reason that could justify limitation of individual freedom is protecting others from being harmed (i.e. their freedom is offended^[6]). Mill's liberalism is a critique on the tendencies of paternalism: i.e. limiting individual liberty due to political, cultural or religious ideologies that subscribe moral rules, even against the will of the individual. It seems paternalism is endemic for religion. For example, most religions oppose the liberty of homosexuals to live in peace. Women, children, apostates, homosexuals are often victim of cultural and religious paternalism.

Humanism embraces the freedom of the individual and thus Mill's harm principle. Respect for individual liberty and the autonomy of the individual are at the heart of humanism. Mill's principle gives an easy to apply ground rule to work with.

Who is in the moral club?

The question is: to whom does the harm principle apply? Who is within the circle of moral consideration? Or, to put it in a more simple way: who is in the moral club? Who are the others whom should not be harmed? Usually the no harm principle is used to humans close by. To come back to the example of the child: it applies to its siblings, and the children at school and in the neighborhood. It generally also applies to some non-human animals: pets. Pets should not be harmed. However, the same parents who teach their children about the harm principle, often present their children body parts of harmed and killed non-human animals for dinner. The harm

afflicted to the millions of animals in factory farming worldwide is outside the moral circle. These 'others' are blind spots.

The moral club could be expanded by taking as criterion the ability to suffer, as philosopher Jeremy Bentham has pointed out in 1789:

“The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?”

It is the ability to suffer that is what is morally relevant. And many non-human animals can suffer, and they do suffer terribly to satisfy our non-vital (thus luxury) preferences. So, it is not difficult, albeit theoretically, to apply the harm principle to all those who can suffer. We should not only do no harm to our pets, but also no harm to farm animals.

Another way to expand the moral club, by taking the ability to suffer (this is what is called 'sentientism') as moral criterion, is the harm done to people out of sight. This can be geographically (like laborers in sweat shops making the sneakers we wear), or temporarily, future generations. When we take into consideration the harm done to future generations, this has considerable consequences to the moral evaluation of the way we live. Most (western) people are living a life with a large ecological footprint. This means that if everybody on the planet would live such a life, we would need several more planets. As we all know, there is only one planet Earth. Rich people are robbing other people, both temporarily and spatially, from their equal share. When we look at the environmental crisis, of which (anthropogenic) climate change^[7] is just one facet, we can see that we are endangering the (atmospheric) conditions of the ecosystem of the planet, which are favorable to the present set of biodiversity including the Homo sapiens. Our present life style harms future generations, who will suffer, and possibly die out, of the consequences of climate change and sea level rise. Present generations are using up large amounts of non-renewable resources, including fossils fuels. There is immense deforestation, desertification and due to overfishing there is a serious danger of empty oceans. Present generations of humans are creating a human made Apocalypse for the not so far future. Maybe it is not a complete Apocalypse in the form of an environmental collapse; but all the signs are pointing that way.^[8] This is where the precautionary principle comes in: if you do not know whether or not an act might have harmful consequences, do not act. The problem is that the dominant political and economic system is geared towards exploiting animals, humans in the third world, and future generations. We are harming future generations, people in poor countries and many non-human animals.

If we take as a moral ground rule the expanded harm principle of, what I call, Green Liberalism, this would have dramatic consequences for our individual lives and our political and economic system. Because humanists take individual liberty as a core value, it seems natural to rethink the harm principle and to extend it by looking at the ability to suffer.

Conclusion: unknowing or taking action?

Let me conclude with two of the most poignant consequences of this inconvenient approach to ethics.

First, we would have to get out of the trap of continuous economic growth and dependence on non-renewable energy sources and resources. We should, quickly, strive towards a steady state

economy at a sustainable level in order to avoid (more) harm to future generations. The UN Earth Charter, issued in 2000, could be of use as a guideline for example:

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.[\[9\]](#)

Second, if we apply the harm principle to include non-human animals, it becomes abundantly clear that we have to get rid of the unnecessary harm done in farming, especially factory farming. Apart from the harm done to animals, factory farming is also a large contributor to the environmental crisis, due to the huge demand for fodder (which leads to deforestation), and severe forms of pollution. At individual level, there seems to be a moral duty not to have an ecological footprint that harms others. Decreasing the ecological footprint of the average westerner involves serious life style changes. The no harm principle points to the direction that we should not harm non-human animals for our non-necessary needs. Humans in developed countries can live perfectly healthy lives on a vegan diet, so there is no need to harm others. Application of the extended no harm principle seems to lead to the inconvenient conclusion that thinking through the harm principle and living up to it, includes veganism. Living without harming others might be a lot more difficult than one thinks.

Philosophy - as striving for a better world - can bring you to conclusions you would rather not draw. Applying the extended harm principle can lead to a world with less suffering and more happiness. But if one wants to live an ethical life and thinks through the harmful consequences one has on others, there is a moral obligation to live up to it – even if you don't like it. [\[10\]](#)

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^[1] An excellent overview of the dynamic history of humanist thought is Bill Cooke's A Wealth of Insights. Humanist Thought since the Enlightenment, 2011.

^[2] Kurtz, Forbidden Fruit, p. 252 - 253.

^[3] See my 'Ecohumanist statement' in Philosophy for a Better World.

^[4] Paul Cliteur argues that such a common moral language must necessarily be secular, that is autonomous, without reliance or dependence on religion. See his book The Secular Outlook, 2011.

^[5] See Paul Kurtz, Forbidden Fruit. The ethics of humanism, 1988.

^[6] It is a paradox that the freedom of expression can lead to (mental) harm to others, who can be offended. Mill argues that freedom of expression should not be curtailed by taking offense, because this would harm the individuals who are limited in their freedom more. So, incitement to violence, and use of violence should be forbidden by the state. Blasphemy, for example, should be legal. The maximum individual freedom, and thus the freedom of expression, comes at a price: people can be offended or hurt. But the benefits of the freedom of expression are the possibility to (politely or impolitely) question claims of religion and (political) ideas and expressions. (See more on this in my book Philosophy for a Better World.)

^[7] See e.g. James Hansen, Storms of my grandchildren. The truth about the coming climate catastrophe and our last chance to save humanity, 2011.

^[8] See for example Bill McKibben, Eaarth. Making a life on a tough new planet; Clive Hamilton, Requiem for Species.

^[9] <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Read-the-Charter.html>

^[10] I elaborate these points in my books Philosophy for a Better World and Harming Others