LIVING ALONE TOGETHER:
On the boundaries of the self and the collective mind

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ABSTRACT

Continuing a previous discussion on different styles of dialogue and different audiences involved in this dialogue, the present article is concerned with some characteristics of the 'third public'. The boundaries that exist not only between the different publics, but also within the third public itself, complicate the process of developing a constructive discourse in the public sphere. The problem is here illustrated by practical examples encountered when developing a code of conduct in the workplace. It is concluded that the dialectic between individual and community plays a decisive role in such a process.

From a previous discussion of different styles of theological dialogue (Lategan 1996), it became clear that the so-called 'third public', or the public sphere, deserves further exploration. Not only are there boundaries between the different publics, but within the third public there are dividing lines that make the development of a constructive dialogue difficult. In the case of South Africa, this inhibits the growth of a public spirit, of an open, participatory process so necessary for sustaining a very fragile democracy.

These difficulties can be illustrated by some examples from an ongoing attempt to develop a 'barefoot' ethics in the open, unprotected space of the third public. The term 'barefoot ethics' is a conscious parallel to Max-Neef's concept of 'barefoot economics'. In protest against the way the First World and the North determine the values and direction of global economics, his work is devoted to an 'alternative economics' in which not only the 'positive' approach of neo-classical economics is exchanged for the 'normative' approach of human scale development, but the underlying value system is expanded and developed into a much richer view of human needs. 'Barefoot economics' takes into account not only the sophisticated and abstract constructs of theoretical and academic economics, but also the values of and effect on the recipients of these economic theories. In a similar fashion, 'barefoot ethics' takes seriously the effect of ethical codes on the recipients of such codes. Even more importantly, it incorporates the contribution of these recepients into the process of developing the ethical code itself. What is presented here, is informed by an ongoing involvement with developing common values in the workplace in various private companies. The focus on the role of the recipients is related to the work of West on the 'ordinary reader', although there are obvious differences. The point to be made here - in order to avoid recurring misunderstandings - is that the involvement of the recipient does not mean that the latter is accorded normative status or becomes the new dominant position, protected from critical scrutiny. It does mean that the development of common values should be approached and recognised as an interactive, inclusive process, in which the contribution of all participants is essential to achieve an enduring result. This might call for steps to be taken to assure that the contribution of the recipient is heard and taken seriously, but does not obviate the need for the critical evaluation of all contributions to the process.

The basic elements on which to build a democracy in South Africa have been put in place - through a difficult and often painful process - and have been consolidated in the form of a new constitution. But considering that these elements are also intended to serve as the basis for civil society, they are in need of being examined more critically. As a step in

that direction, this contribution will concentrate on the dialectic between individual and society. It will do so with reference to a very provocative article by Tzvetan Todorov (1996) that appeared in a recent issue of the *New Literary History* under the title 'Living Alone Together.' More specifically, it will focus on the concept/value/need of *recognition* , one of the basic values recurring in the field work on common values in very different contexts.

Do we need society for our own well-being and fulfillment? How realistic is the appeal to the much invoked 'community' as panacea for all ills and as criterium of all actions? Before we react with rightful indignation to such questions, let us problematise the issue in at least four respects. It might be politically correct and theologically sound to insist on the centrality of the community, but it is not a concept which lends itself to easy handling.

1   The popular reference to *the* community can be seriously challenged for the simple reason that there demonstrably exists a multitude of communities. Individuals can belong simultaneously to any number of these. Hofstede (1991:10) talks of 'layers of culture' in this respect and distinguish at least six levels: The national or state level, the regional and/or ethnic and/or religious and/or linguistic level, the gender level, the social class level and for those who are employed, the organisational or corporate level. As Hofstede shows, additions to this list are easy to make. What community is *the* community and which community is served in the upcoming elections in the Western Cape and KwaZulu/ Natal?

2   The theological emphasis on the covenant, the people of God, the *ekklesia,* the body, the church, the flock and all the other corporate images of the believing community are countered by an equally forceful emphasis on the individual, on individual faith and responsibility and the insistence that membership of the group does *not* guarantee salvation.

3   Despite all the talk of the community, both the accepted Bill of Rights and the new constitution are firmly based on the principle of *individual* rights. There is an understandable resistance to any form *of* 'group rights' in view of the experience of the past. The spectre of *Grense* still haunts us. But quite apart from problems related to the political stigmatisation of the concept, there are also *legal* reasons why rights in the Bill are anchored to individual and not to group rights. Group rights presuppose a legally sound definition of the 'group', which until now has not been forthcoming. In terms of the law, the group is handled indirectly in terms of individual rights. Because the individual has the right to free assosiation, groups can be formed legally in terms of this individual right.

4   A very specific case in point are some of the proposals in the recently released report of the National Commission on Higher Education regarding the governance of tertiary institutions. Rights (autonomy, control over admission) are not given to institutions, but to individuals. Although 'the community' must be represented, alongside students, academics and workers on the various governing bodies, the actual leverage for change is achieved through the funding of individual students and the allocation of study places for these students.

Is the reference to the politically correct and theologically important concept of community only lip service or does it have substance? It is in this respect that Todorov's analysis of individual and society in Western thought is especially illuminating. (A similar analysis of the same dialectic in African thought is sorely needed to broaden our understanding of this issue.) The analysis of Hofstede (1991), was done with a completely

different goal in mind. His attempt to measure the degree of individualism in society, is nonetheless very useful as it adds a wider comparative dimension to the discussion.

Todorov begins with the startling claim that in Western thought, 'the social dimension, the fact of living with others, is not generally conceived as being *necessary* (1996:1). In classical Greek philosophy, the difference of position between self and other is not taken up. The self does indeed need others, but only to display virtue. In the same way, friendship is a merit rather than a need. Others are necessary to complete the natural environment of the individual, but not to serve any specific function.

According to Todorov, a revolutionary break with this tradition comes with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was the first to define humans as beings who need others (1996:2). Besides *amour de soi* (the instinct of self-preservation) and *a7iiolfri~ropre* (vanity, comparing one with others), there is a third sentiment, the 'idea of consideration'. The other is no longer regarded as rival or opponent, as yardstick of comparison, but as complementary of my own humanity - that what is needed for my own completeness. Sociability is therefore neither an accident nor a contingency - it is the definition of the human condition. This makes us the prey of others' needs, but also means that we are always in search for the missing complement. Rousseau understands humans as beings who come into existence with congenital lack, and can therefore claim 'that each of us thus has a need to be considered, a 'need to attach his heart''(1996:4). It is this social sensitivity which is the sources of human virtues and vices. But more importantly - by understanding this as a *universal* human characteristic, Rousseau moves away from the classical tradition where honour and dignity are reserved for the privileged few. It is something every-one can aspire to. (This shift to recognition and dignity for all has important consequences for the development of values in the work place).

Interestingly enough, none other than Adam Smith (a contemporary of Rousseau), takes up this theme. In his struggle against the asocial theories of Hobbes, La Rochefoucauld and Mandeville he finds an ally in Rousseau to defend the importance he (Smith) attaches to sympathy in his own system. (Here again, the emphasis on 'empathy' in the NECF values process is an interesting modern confirmation of Smith's ideas). Smith, as economist and (moral) philosopher, is especially interested in explaining the motivation behind human actions. People are moved, more than anything else, by the desire to be observed, accepted, approved and held in esteem by others. 'No one except the perfect sage and the man depraved to the rank of beasts can remain indifferent to the lure of public recognition' (1996:6). The classic example of how this need triumphs over interest, is the willingness of people to lose their lives for a cause that will bring them honour after death. The need for recognition is not one human motivation among others - it is the truth of other needs. Neither material goods nor pleasure are ends in themselves, but means to assure the consideration of others.

The important contribution of Smith is that he overcomes the opposition between passions and interests, between *amour-propre* and *amour de soi*. The latter is, according to Smith, a means for assuring the consideration of others. The shallow economics of La Rochefoucauld and Mandeville based on the misguided idea that self-interest governs all our actions, must be deepened to account for the full spectrum of human needs and emotions. Here we encounter some indication of what is articulated much more forcefully in Max-Neef's ideas on 'human scale development' - the option for a 'normative' approach to economic needs, in contrast to a 'positive' approach and the broadening of the scope of basic human needs to include the non-material.

At the same time - and this is again anticipating Max-Neef's distinction between positive and destructive satisfiers - the dialectical nature of human needs becomes clear. What can be essential to sustain life in one context can become the source of corruption in the next. For this reason the evaluation of others is essential for our own well-being. 'Because the source of any judgement is in the reference to another, for Adam Smith, as for Rousseau, values, both ethical and aesthetic, can arise only in society' (1996:7). Society acts as a mirror - also in the work place.

Especially on the terrain of the third public, the 'strictly human world' in Todorov's terms, where divine judgement or guidance is not that readily visible, the judgement by fellow humans fulfils an important regulatory function. Smith makes use of a mental construct in this regard, the so-called 'impartial and well-informed Spectator' who lives within, a purified ideal of all the 'others' whom we shall meet in life (what in the twentieth century, George Herbert Mead would call the 'generalised' other, and Mikhail Baktin, 'the superaddressee'' 1996: 8). Here again we encounter some basic elements of the regulating function of participants (or the team) in the values process to monitor a self-generated code of conduct.

Smith thus ends with a dialectical view of individual and society. People do not act purely out of love for humanity. Neither do they act out of egoistic self-interest alone. 'Man (sic!) cannot satisfy himself alone, but neither does he necessarily obey a duty perceived as imposed by the community' (Todorov 1996: 8). At critical moments, a stronger love takes over, a love of what is honourable and noble. It is the desire for fame or consideration, that is, for recognition on the one hand and on the other, the fear of loss of esteem, that is, shame and guilt, which proves the more powerful. In the mining environment, the value of safety of self and others, the solidarity with the team, the respect for life and for the colleague, cut directly across any racial, class or other forms of prejudice at moments of peril and crisis.

Where Smith develops and strengthens Rousseau's intuition, Hegel approaches the issue of individual and society form a much more radical perspective. He also considers the need for recognition as *tire* constitutive human fact. But this is based on a very restricted understanding of recognition. Recognition is not a process where both parties stand to gain from the outcome. My recognition can only be won at the expense of those who recognise me (as being superior). For Hegel, the demand for recognition inevitably implies a struggle for power. My recognition is won by subjugating the other. And since recognition is a value superior to life, it becomes a life-and-death struggle. Recognition means surrendering to someone who is superior. The concept can therefore only operate where there is a conqueror and a conquered and only in terms of a master/slave relationship. 'The history of humanity is none other than the evolution of this master/slave relationship' (1996:11).

The position of Hegel demonstrates two important aspects of the problem. Firstly, the destructive potential of in itself noble values. Secondly, the power of stereotypes and myths. It is exactly in the context of the third public where these issues become acute. Both these aspects needs to be dealt with before an effective code of conduct can be established. In order to be concrete, it will be illustrated by taking the basic value of 'recognition' as our point of departure. This value is not only central, as we have seen, in Todorov's argument about individual and society, but in the actual application of the values process, it has appeared in quite diverse contexts as a very important value.

On this point, Max-Neef's theory of *human scale development* offers two important insights. The one is the recognition of a set of fundamental human *needs* as the basis for effective human development and the second is his distinction between constructive and destructive ways to *satisfy* these needs. The needs are *subsistence, protection, affection,*

understanding, participation, idleness, creation, identity and *freedom.* Without going into the assumptions underlying this classification, it is clear that they cover a much wider spectrum than what is usually assumed in economic theory, and that several presuppose an interaction between individual and society. Due to the fundamental nature of these needs, goods and services (as usually understood in economic theory) can no longer satisfy them at this deeper level (cf. Van Zyl 1994). The important point is that this satisfaction can happen in either a destructive or a positiv) way. A destructive satisfier may satisfy my need very effectively, but at the expense of the needs of others (exile as a way to satisfy my need to protect my political power). In his discussion of Hegel, Todorov provides a striking example of such a destructive or negative satisfier. The conqueror may extract recognition from the conquered, but this is an empty or *valueless* recognition. 'Either a man (sic!) does not obtain recognition because he is conquered, or what he obtains is valueless because it comes from the conquered. The Master 'is recognized by someone whom he does not recognize ... The Master's attitude, therefore, is an existential impasse' ' (1996:~0-11). The slave/master matrix does not only disallow the possibility of recognition, but also of forming a community.

The concepts of Max-Neef have been used to develop common values and a code of conduct in several South African companies. In this process, 'recognition' almost invariably appeared as one of the basic needs that the ethical code should address. The examples used here, come from three specific companies: Vaal Reefs gold mine, North East Cape Forests, a timber company and Channel Africa, the foreign service of the SABC. The following are typical examples of destructive satisfiers that were given for *recognition*, that is, actions or attitudes that make it impossible to achieve recognition:

Not greeting people properly but by nicknames or by function (e.g. 'machine boy') [Vaal Reefs]

Taking credit for programs developed by subordinates in the team [Channel Africa]

Not willing to delegate responsibility [Channel Africa]

Not saying 'thank you' when people do extra work [NECF]

Criticising instead of giving assistance and advice (NECFJ

Not recognising the authority of black people in positions of authority ('I want to speak to the [white] boss') [NECF]

The challenge is therefore to find *positive* satisfiers where my needs are satisfied without destroying the needs of others. In this way, diversity can be handled in a constructive way, as the theory allows for 'harmless' of 'creative' differences - satisfying the need for idleness by cricket, tennis, hiking etc. or making use of the different talents of people in a team. The important thing is to identify the destructive ways in which needs are satisfied. This can only be done *through a process of interaction and negotiation.* The implication is that constructive satisfaction presupposes a community - be that of a group, a team or a wider association.

Examples of positive satisfiers for *recognition* are:

Regular and correct feedback on work well done [Vaal Reefs]

Participation in setting and designing the measurement parameters of the new bonus scheme [Vaal Reefs]

Regular praising of individual and team performance in public - criticising in private [Channel Africa]

Delegating larger responsibilities and allowing more space for initiative [Channel Africa]

Learning to say 'thank you' [NECF]

Listening to the ideas of one's team members and using them [NECF]

Being enthusiastic about one's job [NECF]

Giving rewards (financial, privileges) to people who achieve or exceed the standard [NECF]

Although recognition in the form of financial rewards certainly appears in these satisfiers, it is not the dominant theme (much to the surprise of some!). The emphasis is clearly on 'non-material' forms of recognition, in line with Max-Neef's broader concept of needs.

Hegel's master/slave imagery illustrates a second problem in this regard, namely the strength of myths and stereotypes in programming behaviour and shaping ethical codes. We have already seen that if recognition is understood as a function of the master/slave relationship (as Hegel proposes), recognition ceases to be a value (Todorov 1996:11). Todorov tries to replace the master/slave image by that of mother and child, which - in contrast to Hegel's image - does not signify an adversarial relationship. (This reminds one of Max-Neef's use of a different aspect of the mother/child relationship, namely breast-feeding, to illustrate the simultaneous satisfaction of several needs by the same action - subsistence, protection and affection).

The important question in this regard is: How do we break stereotypes? Not only (although this is important) by suggesting alternative myths and ways of understanding ourselves. Stereotypes are continued, reinforced and protected in like-minded communities. The artificial formation of an alternative community often is the only way to confront and hopefully break stereotypes. The value process therefore quite deliberately creates artificial contexts where management and employees, men and women, black and white are obliged to listen to the perceptions others have of them, to hear the hopes and fear of others, to listen to the expectations their superiors/colleagues/subordinates have of them. The liberating experience of discovering that we often fear the same things, share the same hopes, expect not the impossible, but very basic human things, can lift the debate to higher levels and break apparent deadlocks. If the Truth and Reconciliation Commission can succeed in opening this dimension to its own proceedings, it might be worth all the effort.

Is it true that the position between individual and group must of necessity be a negotiated one – in the space between solitude and solidarity, negotiated between the different groups one individual belongs to simultaneously and between opposing and adversarial loyalties? Can recognition only become a value when the dark side of valueless recognition in a master/slave relationship has become visible in order to release the supportive, creative, and liberative dimensions of the concept? If that is the case, the conclusion must be that we need a community because, at the level of fundamental needs, appropriate satisfiers to address them can only be expressed and designed *collectively* (Van Zyl 1994: 3).

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