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Greetings from Amsterdam!

After a month of lockdown, the Netherlands has opened up again! We are happy to be less restricted in our movements and plans. I am particularly pleased that I will be able to teach on-campus the coming semester, as I am sure the students will be to receive in-person classes.

Over the past time I have had some time to study and write. Today I would like to share one piece with you that I presented at an Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies meeting. These are yearly meetings held in London, but this edition had to be online like the last one. The main organizer Antoine Suarez is developing a very interesting debate around recent advances in science, and their philosophical implications. You can find the [IIS website here](#).

I was invited to give a talk about the question whether God is needed for human dignity. I have tried to explain different approaches to this question, as you can see below. I hope it is of interest to you.

All the best, and happy reading,

Daniel Bernardus

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1) An Idea: Human dignity: is God needed?

Thank you to Antoine and the other organizers for the invitation to talk to you again. As usual, I will give a philosophical talk. I will again start from the work of Leonardo Polo, but the thoughts I present here today are my own, building forward on a small subset of Polo's extensive work.

I have been asked to start from the following axiom: Humankind has a dignity and value animals and machines do not have. Then I was asked to answer the question whether God is needed for understanding human dignity.

according to modern, classical, and Christian thought. Then, what could we mean by “needing God” in each of these thought streams? We will see how the conclusions from the different thought streams collide and cross-fertilize. Based on these reflections I will draw several conclusions.

What is the origin of human dignity?

I have talked to you on previous occasions about the three “roots” that Polo identifies, three core conceptions of what it means to be human. It is no surprise that these conceptions are tightly linked to how we conceive of human dignity. I will briefly recap each notion and link it to human dignity.

For modern thought, what makes us human is what we produce. We produce things, but we can also produce knowledge, some even say we produce ourselves. This notion has implications for human dignity, because if we “make ourselves” human, we also make our own dignity. This could easily lead to the idea that more successful people are also somehow more dignified.

In contrast, the central notion in classical thought is that of the “act”. Classical thinkers realize that first of all, we are actually human, both in our being and in our thinking, but that the human potential we all possess does need to be realized. “Become what you are” is a typically classical slogan. In this vision, dignity is something inherent in each human being, yet is also intrinsically related to rationality. Not necessarily in the sense that one needs to exercise rationality to be dignified, but rather that the rational capacity which we can develop testifies to the inherent dignity we possess.

Finally in the context of Christian thought the notion of the “person” became central, which was later more widely adopted. Linked to personhood is the idea that we are all unique, especially also in the context of the personal relationships we have. I am not just the exemplar of the human species, I am a person with a name, with a unique relationship to my parents, to other people and most importantly to God. It is therefore in this uniqueness and relationality that my dignity becomes manifest.

What do we mean by “needing God”?

The expression “do we need God”, evokes Laplace’s response to Napoleon’s question “where is God in your system?” to which the answer was “Sire, we don’t need that hypothesis”. Such an approach is very much in line with the modern, and specifically the scientific mindset. In that view, we are independent observers trying to give an ordered account of the physical world that is verifiable, or at least to be corroborated by empirical observation and

the human dignity observation” (if human dignity can be observed at all). But could this question be approached differently?

“I know that I know nothing” is a famous saying attributed to Socrates. Its precise meaning is debated, but anyone familiar with Plato’s writings will agree that this is not a form of nihilism. (By the way, if you haven’t read the apology, please do so!) Rather it stems from the realization that the reality Socrates is trying to approach, even though it can successfully be approached through reason, cannot be exhausted by reason. The balance between what we know and what we do not know is decisively tilted to the direction of what we don’t know. In other words, there is a decisive component of mystery to our reality, and we need to remain open to that. In that light, the question “do we need God” takes on a different meaning. It could read something like: “If we rationally confront the mystery of the world, is there then reason to think that God exists?” To which the ancient Greek answer is a resounding “Yes!”

To delve into the different classical “proofs” of God's existence would go too far here. I would just like to point to one concrete observation, which is the very fact that our rationality says something about the real world at all. Seemingly, the rational order we can give to things in our minds somehow corresponds to a rational order in the world around us. The professor of theoretical biology that I studied under, Bas Kooijman, repeatedly expressed his admiration at this fact, even though he was not a religious person. How come the world is so ordered, if we also know that things, left alone, tend to increase their entropy? In scientific terms: how come the world has laws for us to discover? The Greeks, reflecting about this rational world order, came to think of a “mind of the universe”. So yes, the Greeks thought because of this and other arguments that there is reason to think that God exists.

Even though Socrates did not conceptualize the personal approach, that was deepened in Christian thought, I think his story can also be used to illustrate what a personal mindset would entail. After all, his quest for wisdom was triggered by his relationship to the Delphi oracle, who had said that “Socrates is the wisest of all men”. He didn’t believe that, and set out to disprove the claim. Also, he was often driven by what he called his “daemon” to do or not do certain things; for example, his daemon prevented him from entering into political life. At the same time, Socrates’ teaching was highly relational, attempting to have profound conversations with many people. Those conversations were aimed at the good of these people, but weren’t for that reason always comfortable to everyone. Indeed, he irritated many, which would eventually become an important factor for his condemnation to death. In this

order to guide us towards what is good for us, and to give us direction and meaning in our lives' adventure. Clearly, at least Socrates needed divine help and guidance for that.

Through reflection on our being-persons, we come to a whole new way of approaching the divine. Indeed, we discover our intimate desires for co-existing with others (for not being lonely), for freely knowing and loving others. That goes together with a desire for making sense out of our lives, and for us to have a life project that is fulfilling, also in relation with others. Those desires can be repressed at times, but they tend to come back after a while. While the desires themselves may seem vague and confusing, their negations: loneliness, lack of freedom, and loving knowledge of others does seem to cause harm to our mental health. From that, we can deduce that seemingly our personhood does have some universal demands to make. Our relationality is constitutional. And therefore if reality is indeed reasonably constituted, it makes sense for us to proceed from a relational reality that can fulfill our desires. This is a natural route to discover our divine filiation, our being children of God.

If we then look specifically at the context of the Christian religion, here we find a realization that God is not some abstract entity, but a loving Father who actually takes action to approach us, and to actively restore the relationship with Him that we have lost. A relationship that reveals not only more about God to us, but also helps us get to know ourselves and the meaning of our lives much more profoundly. It goes without saying that the Christian answer to "do we need God" to take action to restore His relationship with us is answered with a firm affirmative.

Coming back to the main question.

Combining what we have seen from the roots so far, we can formulate the following answers to the question whether we need God for understanding human dignity.

Someone steeped in modern thought, with a scientific observer mentality might say that we make ourselves dignified, our dignity results from our actions, and therefore we do not need God for that.

Someone steeped in classical thought, rationally but humbly exploring the mystery of the universe, would say that if we carefully reflect about what rationality is, if we come to realize that it is an essential element of what makes us human, and if we reflect on where the origin of rationality lies, we come to conclude that we have God to thank for both our rationality and our dignity.

necessarily Christian), looking for one's own personal and unique mission in life's adventure in a free, knowing, and loving relationship together with others, will through reflection realize that the strongest source of the dignity in his life comes especially from this filial relationship with God.

Synthesis

We now have three parallel answers, corresponding to different views of what it means to be human, and different attitudes towards our question. The popular, and relativist thing to do would now be to say: choose your pick, whatever feels good to you! And in a sense, that needs to be said, because clearly the attitude that we take towards problems is our own to choose. However, if we are indeed reasonable beings, we can think about which attitude it is most reasonable to take before this question, and of course to what extent these attitudes and answers can be combined. So I would like to end with a few reflections about this question.

I think it is superficial to say that all attitudes are born equal, especially because these different approaches allow us to understand a different range of realities. It doesn't have to be argued to this audience that natural science is a very powerful methodology that has taught us much about the natural world. However, thinking that the foundation of science – the very fact that human beings are able to observe the world and say reasonable and true things about it – can be understood from within science is simply incorrect. As the Greeks observed, objects of thought are special especially because they have immaterial properties – they are not subject to time, for instance. That means that the fact that Science works, shows that reality is richer than what Science can study, and for answering these profound foundational questions, the classical and personal attitudes are much more fitting. According to those attitudes: yes we do “need God” in different ways, also to make sense of and more deeply understand our human dignity.

2. An Experience: Support from the Classics!

In this (video) podcast Emma Cohen de Lara and I talk about the support we can get nowadays from Classical thought, which turns out to be surprisingly relevant. It is the third Canyons and Stars podcast.

Canyons and Stars is a movement of educators - parents as well as education professionals. At Canyons and Stars we believe that young people should be given hope by teaching them how to embrace reality and discover their personal calling.

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This is the third [Canyons and Stars podcast!](#) ([Audio-only version here](#))

4) An Anecdote: TEDx together

Towards the end of last year one of my students invited me to submit a pitch for the TEDxAUcollege pitch night. I had never done that but decided to accept the challenge.

I decided to collaborate with professor Gloria María Tomás y Garrido, whom I got to know in the course on Leonardo Polo. She had an amazing idea regarding "personal antifragile" which is a very intriguing concept.

The pitch evening had 8 pitches, of which one would be selected by a jury and the other by the audience. [This is a recording of the pitch we developed.](#) Unfortunately we didn't get selected, but what was amazing was the response that came to the pitch from many angles. Especially the people in the Polo course were very animated, and it has triggered many discussions with friends and acquaintances. Since that is what we're trying to do with this e-zine, I thought you might like to hear as well!

5) What's coming up?

I've been working hard at finishing the course on the thought of Leonardo Polo. Except for the things in this e-zine there will be more inspiration coming from there. I will keep you updated!

Acknowledgements

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this E-zine in its entirety, but not to modify, shorten or copy from it in any way. I actually appreciate it if you share the entire E-zine with friends, family or colleagues who might be interested. I hope we can spark many good conversations together.

Daniel Bernardus

Publisher, Relax, Relate, Reflect about Big Questions E-zine



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