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Monde et Mondanité

par les soins de

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TABLE OF CONTENTS / TABLE DES MATIÈRES

Peter KEMP, Preface	7
Peter KEMP, Préface	11
Peter KEMP, The Globalization of the World	15
Rémi BRAGUE, L'Homme du monde	29
Don IHDE, Philosophy of Technology	91
Vittorio MATHIEU, Economics	109
Tomonobu IMAMICHI, La Technique d'aujourd'hui et les problèmes d'esthétique.....	149
Francisco MIRÓ QUESADA C., Politics	169
David M. RASMUSSEN, Reasonability and the Cosmopolitan Imagination : Arendt, Korsgaard and Rawls.....	187
INDEX	207

PREFACE

The idea of globalization (*mondialisation*) is in fashion. But what, in this globalization, does « globe » or « world » (*monde*) signify ? This book will attempt to answer this question, first by analysing the origin and development of the concept of world from Greek thought up to the 20th century, and then by examining perspectives on the world, insofar as it is becoming a technological, economic, aesthetic, and political world.

Rémi Brague returns to the Greek idea of the *cosmos* in order to track the worldhood (*mondanité*) of the world, that is, the process by which the idea of the world is formed. He shows that this idea was never intended to be a description of a reality – of, for instance, physical reality – but always expressed a value judgement. If the universe constitutes the world, it is because it is an order of things, a celestial order, that humans are called to imitate in their moral lives. But this world is not an external authority we are required to obey. The *cosmos* is in us in the same way as, for Kant, the moral law lives in us.

But this conception of the world has disappeared today. Brague states that cosmology as moral guide no longer exists ; physical nature no longer speaks to us, and it can even appear terrifying, as witnessed in the 18th century with the earthquake of Lisbon. On the contrary, we have developed « worldviews », or *Weltanschauungen*, that express the value of non-physical realities. The world in which we can henceforth live is a human world – that is, a social, moral, or « intelligible » world. The world is now a way of seeing and living reality, and things and people attain their membership in the world through a process of « worlding / world-constitution » (*mondanéité*). We now constitute our world or our own particular worlds, for to exist as human reality is to « be-in-the-world », as Heidegger says.

It is in this way that the world has become a world of technologically produced human works. Don Ihde shows how a world has developed in which technologies are no longer considered neutral means serving the ends of human action, but become the very means by which people exist in the world. From this perspective he envisions three main areas of difficulty for a philosophy of technology : first, how to react with respect to the

system of interactions that constitutes our environment, in order to rehabilitate a polluted world and avoid the major accidents instigated by high technology and big industry ; second, how to resolve ethnic conflicts and promote respect for values of tolerance and sympathy in ever more multicultural societies ; and finally, how to control the biotechnological manipulation of the microscopic world. All these problems attest to the fact that people are no longer neutral observers of the world, but more or less informed participants.

This participation also has an economic dimension. Vittorio Mathieu construes economics as the science of the role of money at two levels – that of the individual and that of society. In trade between individuals each can pursue his own interests, but for society the result of commerce is something other than the ends pursued by each economic agent – that is, it is the distribution of goods and services not expressly intended by the particular purchases and sales of merchants. One can carry out, however, non-economic – that is to say political – interventions in economic life. But the effects of such interventions are limited, for no economy can exist without the freedom of each to transform his money into the production or acquisition of products or services. To possess money is to have freedom of choice ; it is to have a power that permits one to wait, and thus to have time at one's disposal. And if the value of money decreases through inflation, this is certainly an economic fact, but its cause is not economic. Inflation is the result of a form of robbery, a political evil that must be combatted. Citizens, in a state characterized by material abundance, on the other hand, would be assured of a basic income in order that they be able to freely dispose of their own time.

But the economic world is not the only sphere of freedom. Tomonobu Imamichi, an eco-ethical philosopher pursuing the conjunction of technology and the good life, analyses the capacity of aesthetic experience to disclose a world other than those worlds that arise from the destruction of the « fullness of the moment » through the technology of time-acceleration. Through the experience of art, people can resist two opposing worldviews, neither of which leaves room for human freedom : that of a mechanical-mathematical world, and that of a world of animal unconsciousness.

In the eastern tradition this aesthetic experience is tied to a religious experience, which makes possible the ecstasy that enables the human spirit to distance itself from the world of technological efficiency. Thus for

Imamichi art is the opening toward « the horizon of eternal being that technology tries to supersede with its continuous functioning ».

It must also not be forgotten that politics creates a world in which great tasks are presented to us. On the basis of a conception of the world of politics as a world of power, Francisco Miró Quesada C. emphasises that the great political questions are not solvable without worldviews that express value systems. A purely pragmatic worldview is not sufficient, for example, to enable one to respect human rights and oppose war, racism, etc. ; also needed is a philosophical reflection that subscribes to a rational ideal of life.

David Rasmussen returns to this ideal in Kant's view of history « from the cosmopolitan point of view », and in the idea of reasonability in John Rawls' *The Law of Peoples*. Rasmussen thinks that to prescribe not only a rational but a reasonable coexistence among so-called liberal and non-liberal societies, as Rawls does, implies a weak cosmopolitanism, even though Rawls doesn't see himself as cosmopolitan. What is in fact at issue is a view of the world based on the aesthetic judgment that humans share in being sensible beings, and which thus allows one to adopt fundamental common principles of practical and political life and therein to fulfill the obligation to live together. In this way, *sensus communis* appears as a cosmopolitan concept, which founds a political globalization of the world.

Thus, this book inscribes itself into the current debate on globalization, which integrates, for good and bad, all expressions of human life into one global system. The danger of this global transformation of the world arises from the fact that all local, regional, and national power risks being neutralised for the benefit of an anonymous and indeterminable techno-economic power. In what follows, I attempt to grasp the meaning of that globalization upon which the destiny of our planet depends.

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Peter KEMP.

PRÉFACE

L'idée de mondialisation est à la mode. Mais qu'est-ce que signifie « monde » dans cette mondialisation ? C'est une question philosophique à laquelle nous cherchons à répondre dans cet ouvrage en analysant l'origine et le développement du concept même dans la pensée grecque jusqu'au 20^e siècle, puis en examinant les perspectives du monde dans la mesure où il devient un monde technologique, économique, esthétique et politique.

Rémi Brague retourne à l'idée grecque du *cosmos* pour suivre « *la mondanité* » du monde, c'est-à-dire le processus par lequel se forme l'idée du monde. Il montre que cette idée n'a jamais voulu être une description d'une réalité, par exemple la réalité physique, mais a toujours exprimé un jugement de valeur. Si l'univers constitue le monde, c'est parce qu'il est un ordre des choses, un ordre céleste, que l'homme est appelé à imiter dans sa vie morale. Mais ce monde n'est pas une instance extérieure à laquelle il s'agirait d'obéir. Le *cosmos* est en nous de la même manière que la loi morale chez Kant habite notre intérieur.

Or cette conception du monde a disparu aujourd'hui. Brague constate qu'il n'y a plus de cosmologie comme guide moral; la nature physique ne nous parle plus, elle peut même se montrer terrifiante, comme en témoignait au 18^e siècle le tremblement de terre de Lisbonne. Par contre, nous avons développé des « visions du monde », des *Weltanschauungen*, qui expriment la valeur des réalités non-physiques. Le monde dans lequel on peut vivre est désormais un monde humain, que ce soit le monde social, moral, le « monde intelligible » ou autre. Le monde est maintenant une manière de voir et de vivre la réalité, et les choses et les hommes acquièrent leur appartenance à un monde par un processus de *mondanéité*. Nous constituons maintenant notre monde ou nos propres mondes, car exister comme réalité humaine est « être-dans-le-monde », comme le dit Heidegger.

C'est ainsi que le monde est devenu un monde des œuvres humaines créées par la technologie. Don Ihde montre comment s'est fait un monde où les technologies ne sont plus considérées comme des moyens neutres en vue des fins de l'action humaine, mais deviennent des

moyens par lesquels l'homme existe dans le monde. Dans cette perspective il voit trois grands domaines de problèmes pour une philosophie de la technologie : d'abord comment réagir par rapport au système d'interactions qui constitue notre environnement pour rétablir un monde non-pollué et éviter les accidents majeurs provoqués par la haute technologie et la grande industrie ; ensuite comment surmonter les conflits ethniques et faire respecter les valeurs de tolérance et d'indulgence dans des sociétés de plus en plus multiculturelles ; enfin comment contrôler les manipulations biotechnologiques des micro-aspects du monde ? Tous ces problèmes témoignent du fait que l'homme n'est plus un observateur neutre du monde, mais un participant plus ou moins informé.

Cette participation a aussi une dimension économique. Vittorio Mathieu analyse l'économie comme science du rôle de l'argent à deux niveaux : celui de l'individu et celui de la société. Dans le commerce entre des individus chacun peut poursuivre ses propres intérêts, mais pour la société le résultat du commerce est autre chose que les fins poursuivies par chaque agent économique. Le résultat est une distribution des biens et des services qui n'est pas visée par les achats particuliers et les ventes particulières des commerçants. Cependant on peut effectuer des interventions non-économiques, c'est-à-dire politiques dans la vie économique. Mais les effets de ces interventions sont limités, car il n'y a pas d'économie sans la liberté de chacun de disposer de son argent comme ressource à transformer en travail en vue d'obtenir des produits ou des services. Posséder l'argent est une liberté de choix, c'est avoir un pouvoir qui permet d'attendre, donc d'avoir du temps disponible. Et si la valeur de l'argent baisse par inflation, c'est certes un fait économique, mais sa cause ne l'est pas. L'inflation est l'effet d'un brigandage qu'il faut combattre comme un mal politique. Par centre dans un État de bien-être les citoyens sont assurés d'un minimum d'argent pour pouvoir disposer librement de leur propre temps.

Or le monde économique n'est pas la seule sphère de liberté. Tomonobu Imamichi, philosophe de l'éco-éthique visant la vie bonne dans une conjonction technologique, analyse la capacité de l'expérience esthétique d'ouvrir un autre monde que ceux qui résultent de l'anéantissement de « la plénitude de l'instant » par la technique de l'accélération du temps. Par l'expérience de l'art l'homme peut en effet s'opposer à deux visions contraires du monde sans place pour la liberté

humaine : celle d'un monde mécano-mathématique, et celle d'un monde d'une inconscience animale.

Selon la tradition de l'Orient cette expérience esthétique est liée à une expérience religieuse qui autorise l'extase qui permet à l'esprit humain de se distancier du monde de l'efficacité de la technique. Ainsi pour Imamichi l'art est-il l'ouverture vers « l'horizon de l'être éternel que la technique veut remplacer par sa fonction continue ».

Aussi il ne faut pas oublier que la politique fait également un monde où de grandes tâches se présentent à nous. Sur la base d'une conception du monde de la politique comme un monde de pouvoir Francisco Miró Quesada C. souligne que les grandes questions politiques ne sont pas solubles sans des visions du monde qui expriment des systèmes de valeurs. Par exemple, pour s'opposer à la guerre, au racisme, etc., et pour respecter les droits de l'homme, une vision purement pragmatique du monde ne suffit pas ; il faut une réflexion philosophique qui fait valoir un idéal rationnel de la vie.

C'est cette idéal que retrouve David Rasmussen dans la vision kantienne de l'histoire « au point de vue cosmopolitique » et dans l'idée du raisonnabilité (*reasonability*) selon *Le droit des gens (The Law of Peoples)* de John Rawls. Rasmussen considère que prescrire, comme l'a fait Rawls dans ce livre, une coexistence raisonnable (et pas seulement rationnelle) entre sociétés dites libérales et sociétés non-libérales implique un cosmopolitisme faible, bien que Rawls ne se voie pas comme cosmopolite. Il s'agit en effet d'une vision du monde fondée sur le jugement esthétique que les êtres humains partagent en étant des êtres sensibles et qui fait qu'on peut adopter des principes fondamentaux communs de la vie pratique et politique et en dégager l'obligation de vivre ensemble. En ce sens le *sensus communis* apparaît comme un concept cosmopolite, qui fonde une mondialisation politique du monde.

Ainsi, ce livre s'inscrit dans le débat actuel sur la mondialisation qui pour le bien et pour le mal intègre toutes les manifestations de la vie humaine dans un système global. Le danger de cette transformation globale du monde vient du fait que tout pouvoir local, régional et national risque d'être neutralisé au profit d'un pouvoir techno-économique anonyme et indéterminable. En introduction, je cherche à saisir le sens de cette mondialisation dont dépend le destin de notre planète.

Nous remercions le Centre national de la recherche scientifique (Paris), le Conseil international de la philosophie et des sciences

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Peter KEMP.

THE GLOBALIZATION OF THE WORLD

Peter KEMP

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When this work was prepared, the theme of « the world » could still be understood as particularly philosophical, and speaking of worldhood (in French : *mondialité*) could be considered as belonging exclusively to the vocabulary of philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. But today, at the beginning of the 21st century, everyone talks about globalization (*mondialisation*).

Globalization is of course considered to be economic above all. One thinks of the global economy, of the global market in which the importance of local, regional, and even national political authorities is reduced more and more, to the benefit of transnational financial powers. But this economic globalization is unthinkable without a technological globalization of the means of communication ; and thus globalization, for better or worse, also comes to encompass all of culture.

For this reason, this all-encompassing globalization requires a globalization of ethics ; that is, an affirmation of universally valid norms by which the creation and development of worldwide technology – which not only condition the functioning of the global economy but also present a challenge to political and cultural life – can be evaluated and judged.

1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF GLOBALIZATION

It was the Canadian Marshall McLuhan who in 1964 proposed the conception of the world as a global society or « global village », a result of media and especially television, which made our eyes and ears

henceforth capable of apprehending the entire world¹. The decisive event that inspired this idea of a worldwide society was the funeral of president John F. Kennedy, which McLuhan followed, with the entire world, on the screen of a television. The beginning of the Vietnam war, displayed live on television, also played a role for this new conception of the world. It is remarkable that this first conception of globalization issued from reflection on the importance of a technology, not from an argument about the economy. Later, television companies such as CNN and BBC fully realized McLuhan's vision of an electronic world that united humanity in one global point of view on reality.

The conception of globalization as technological creation has endured for a considerable length of time. In 1969, Zbigniew Brzezinski, then professor of the University of Columbia and the future advisor of president Jimmy Carter, spoke of the American superpower as the « first global society in history »² because it was created through the advent of the telematic revolution. This society, according to Brzezinski, succeeded in proposing to other nations a « global model of modernity », which asserted the same normativity over the entire planet.

It was later Theodore Lewitt who, in a 1983 article in *Harvard Business Review*, first spoke of financial globalization using the expression *the globalization of markets*, which signifies that, by selling the same things, in the same manner everywhere, all the world's markets converge. Lewitt opposes this globalization to the relation between the markets of rich countries and those of less advanced countries, according to which multinationals sold to poor countries products that had become obsolete in rich countries. In 1990 Kenichi Ohmae published *The Borderless World : Power and Strategy in the Interlinked Economy*. In this book he extends the notion of globalization to every link in the chain of creation of economic value, whether it be research development (R-D), engineering, production, marketing, service, or finance. This process results in global integration, where corporations belonging to the same group manage their R-D, finance their investments, and recruit their personnel on a global scale. Globalization thus specifies a form of management of the large multinational corporation that is fully integrated with the global order.

¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media : The Extensions of Man* (Toronto : McGraw Hill, 1964).

² Cited by Armand Mattelart, « La nouvelle idéologie globalitaire », in *La mondialisation au-delà des mythes*, éd. Serge Cordellier (Paris : Éditions La Découverte, 1997/2000): 85.

The foundation is thus set by which the most internationalized businesses can establish the rules of the economy and release themselves from rules previously imposed by nation-states. As Serge Cordellier states in a book he wrote on globalization, one « passes from micro- to macro-economy, from rules of good private management to the establishment of economic politics and the construction or redefinition of national institutions »³. The latter become more and more powerless in the face of the strategies of large corporations. It follows that, as consumers give in to the temptations of international producers who offer them standardized products at a good price and choose a mode of production beyond all democratic control, governments and national parliaments could lose all ability to influence national economic developments. Transactions now pass directly to the international level, where they also risk being disrupted by a casino-economy that is capable of bringing about the most extreme losses of capital.

Yet the development of this globalization has transformed the notion of globalization itself. The world is no longer a global village in which everyone has the same experience at the same time, in worldwide transparency, but it has become an opaque network of economic and technological manipulations. This means that globalization does not entail a stronger or more profound common life among people, but an increase in segregation and an exclusion of society's most vulnerable. The abolition of borders has become not a liberation of people but a liberation of new divisions, cutting across ancient associations, between the dominating and the dominated.

The entire food market has become particularly suspect, since products lose quality by standardization, and the risks of a more and more geneticized production are less and less controllable.

It is true that globalization also carries with it positive aspects, accelerating the growth in the production of certain works of quality, and above all increasing the exchange of information and innovations that encourage the increased circulation of ideas and the proliferation of inventions. Not everything must be rejected. But without control of this globalization, one gives priority to the functioning of the market as opposed to all other matters : social progress, improved health, cultural education, environmental protection, and sustainable and viable development.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

The consequences of globalization are never purely economic, because the global economy is conditioned today by technological development and above all by the development of the means of communication of persons and information – especially by the means of rapid transportation, e-mail, and the internet.

The economy, or the symbolic exchange of product and service values, is in fact nothing without the technologies of communication. Even pure economic speculation does not intervene in the market without being conveyed by the telematic system. And even if this system does not render the world transparent, as McLuhan believed, this theorist of the « technological extensions of man » had reason to conceive of globalization as an effect of electronic communication. The universal aspect of technologies is no longer only the fact that a tool can become universally usable, or that the combination of science and *techné* that fundamentally constitutes modern technology is the condition for the project of a worldwide technological civilization, but also the fact that communication among people is capable of integrating all members of humanity and of transforming the individual of the « dwelling » into the individual of the world.

That economic-technological globalization encourages one to understand oneself as a global being is a promising development, but one that also constitutes a great danger.

2. THE DANGERS OF GLOBALIZATION

Since globalization is conditioned by technological development and permits the individual to affirm himself as a global being who has created himself by means of technical thinking, the individual of the globalized society can be tempted to understand his own thinking as purely instrumental.

The danger of this notion of thinking has often been noted by philosophers who have shown that, if thinking is only an instrument among others, man would be incapable of understanding himself. Everything is a means, but for what ? This question would have no response, for one would not conceive of a human being in this case as other than a thing – not, for instance, as an end in itself, as Immanuel Kant did.

It is this reduction of thinking that made possible the ideology of expertise I examined in my ethics of technology, *L'irremplaçable*⁴. It is the idea that all the questions one could ask have a technical solution, if a solution exists. Thus the political questions concerning social justice, that is, the equitable distribution of goods and burdens, services and obligations, are considered problems that must be resolved by means of technical measures. Therefore, there no longer remain any choices based on conviction and point of view ; no matter what difficulty there is, it is in principle surmountable by science and calculation.

This is why specialists are called in to resolve questions and thus to intervene as experts – that is, specialists who leave their proper domain in which their expertise is sufficient in order to enter into a different domain in which conceptions of humanity, society, and nature conflict and should have the last word.

The danger of what Herbert Marcuse called the thinking of one-dimensional man⁵, of which the ideology of expertise is a manifestation, increased yet again with technological globalization. For the technical individual, who understands himself as a global individual by means of his participation in the process of globalization, is not only blind with respect to himself, but also with respect to communication with others.

People today do not really know what communication is. They often believe that it is an exchange of information, as though the living individual were a computer connected to the internet and exchanging information with other machines. But the computer can never become something other than a means of processing data and transmitting information, and this computer is nothing without the human being who uses it as a means. Moreover, there is no means of communication without at least two living beings who live together and exchange information for this common life. This is why the most profound communication concerns this very community ; it addresses itself to the other in order to affirm him and say, maybe even without words : You have value for me. True communication is the affirmation of existence ; the exchange of information is secondary and sometimes not even necessary.

⁴ Peter Kemp, *L'irremplaçable, Un Éthique de la technologie* (Paris : Cerf, 1997) : Ch. 4. Cf. Pierre-Philippe Druet, Peter Kemp, Georges Thill, *Technologies et sociétés* (Paris : Éditions Galilée, 1980): Ch. 4.

⁵ Herbert Marcuse : *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), 2nd ed. (Boston : Beacon Press, 1992).

Thus we find ourselves today in a paradoxical situation in which, thanks to globalization, humanity has never had a greater capacity for communication, but also in which, in this world become global, the comprehension of communication as affirmation of the existence of others has never been so mediocre.

If the danger entailed by globalization is the disappearance of the sense of true communication, then we also risk losing control of technologies, which thereby become dangerous for their users – for consumers and for those neighboring factories that employ high-risk technologies in their production.

Certain major technological accidents – those of Seveso, Bhopal, and Chernobyl among the most serious – have been signs of alarm, arousing the public and making it attentive to the danger of those technologies that are capable of escaping from all control and thus resulting in catastrophe.

Today, however, one speaks less of possible accidents in the chemical and nuclear industries and more of the dangers that the food production industries represent, due to their development and use of biotechnologies on plants and animals. Where this production is globalized, an accident like that of the mad cow can eventually have enormous consequences, by spreading to all the corners in which the market touched by this accident extends. The effects of biotechnological and especially genetic accidents can also spread like AIDS has, since the need for nourishment is no less strong than the sexual need.

The control of technologies is today more difficult than ever, since globalization means that all decisions important for technological development are : a) assumed by the centers of power concealed in international businesses ; b) substitute for political decisions ; and c) thereby threaten all democracies and their power of control over this development.

3. THE GLOBALIZATION OF ETHICS

These dangers of globalization constitute a challenge to ethics, or to the conception of the good way of life. For it is unquestionably in the daily experiences with close relatives and in social groups (family, work teams, community, etc.) that human beings experience good and bad, and forge visions of the good life by which they can justify moral judgments.

How do these visions apply to the social relations that technical-economic globalization requires and institutes ? Are not all these visions of local origin inadequate to the worldwide systems that invent their own rules and aim at imposing their own norms on life, be it local, regional, or national ?

The same question can be posed if one supposes that norms are often instituted in a group or society by the will of a powerful person or a few rulers whom people fear and obey. For the origin of the moral can also be a local origin – a group or society – and one might wonder how norms that are valuable in a limited context could attain any validity in a global context.

However, if we have been able to observe an increasing globalization of the economy on the basis of technologies of communication that have become worldwide, we can also follow the development of ethics as a process toward the globalization of ethics. Moreover, it is well-known that the criterion of universal validity has been applied to ethics by European philosophers for several centuries, and particularly by Kant. I do not intend, however, to trace here the history of the globalization of ethics. I prefer to attempt to show a logic of globalization according to which the original vision of the good life can serve as the basis of a development that, by means of various stages, results in an ethical vision concerning all life on earth.

First, the ethical must necessarily be narrated, because it arises from an experience of the course and passing of life, in which the will to good and the tendency toward evil have been manifested. Narrative is necessary because narration is the only form of language that progresses as life progresses, and so the only language that can grasp the sense of action, be it good or destructive. The narrative takes time as life takes time.

But should we not suppose that many moral norms are originally the expressions of the will of a powerful master ? Certainly. The fact that people obey a person of power does not indicate that they do it out of respect for ethical ideas or for the moral law of their own practical reason. They can do it out of pure fear or out of need for protection, which the powerful they obey can offer, without being motivated by the recognition of a conception of the good life. In other words, norms do not have true validity and are not truly moral if they are not justified by a conception of ethics, based on a narrated vision, which testifies to a fundamental experience of the good life.

From the moment at which a person has the courage to make use of his own reason and to refuse to follow the one who says : « Do not reason, obey ! » – it is at this moment that he has succeeded in emerging from the state of immaturity (*Unmündigkeit*), as Kant writes in his essay, *What is Enlightenment ?* It is the moment at which he no longer wants to obey a moral norm without simultaneously comprehending how this norm can be justified as aspiring toward the good life. And it is therefore the moment at which the narrative vision becomes essential as the foundation for this justification. But the narratives that claim to speak of the good life are numerous, and often even indirectly describe its destruction ; we live in an ocean of stories. Thus we can ask ourselves : What are the most important or most decisive narratives ?

Before answering this question, a clearer conception of the relation between moral norms and the narrative visions of ethics must be developed. This relationship is rarely direct, or without intermediaries.

The primary intermediary is the ethical idea one draws out of certain narratives. Indeed, certain narratives show themselves to be more meaningful and resistant to repetition than others. From them we can glean content that, although initially abstract, can be rediscovered as common through shared narratives.

The idea of care for the weak has been drawn out in our culture as the central idea of our narrative universe, its center of gravity. Expressed under the form of an ethical injunction, it is known as the commandment of love for one's fellow human beings. It is the love that the Christians celebrated as *agape*, or community through love. In medieval culture it becomes charity, *caritas*. And today it is called « care » in English, « Fürsorge » in German, and « sollicitude » or « souci pour autrui » in French.

It is true that these different names do not indicate precisely the same thing, since they express notions that are marked by the particular context of meaning to which each belongs. For example, the Latin term *caritas* has assimilated classical Greek culture's idea of friendship. We can maintain, however, that there exists a fundamental conception of solicitude that is the result of a series of ideas by which human beings, in the course of our culture's history, have assembled the content of the most expressive and persuasive narratives of good and evil.

Must we conclude from this that ethical ideas are relative ? Yes or no ?

Yes, insofar as it is true that these ideas would never have formed if they had not appeared in a determinate culture. Yes also in the sense in which an idea clearly distilled from a particular culture can indicate more than an idea whose abstract content one finds quite easily in several cultures. In this way the Judeo-Greek idea of care for others indicates more than the Golden Rule : The idea of care concerns the concrete help of others, whereas the Golden Rule is limited to stipulating that one do to the other what one wishes the other would do to oneself (or does not do to others what one does not wish others to do to oneself).

No, because nothing prevents that an idea first appearing in a particular culture could progressively acquire universal validity. This depends above all on dialogue among cultures, and on the trustworthiness that the idea is capable of representing to the eyes of those belonging to cultures in which this idea has not been central from the start. Unfortunately, Europeans have often not succeeded in practicing the love they have preached to others.

Declarations and international conventions on the rights of man, however, testify to the fact that ethical ideas that contain some concrete content can – in prescribing respect for the freedom and dignity of people – be affirmed globally and obtain universal validity. These rights become real expressions of care for others, insofar as they are not only affirmed as my or our rights, but, with Emmanuel Levinas, as « the rights of the other »⁶.

This reflection has already led us to recognise that the ethical idea cannot remain too general when it is a matter of translating the narrative ethical vision into concrete norms. We need more precise notions of what must be taken into account if the good life is to be protected against violence and repression. I call these notions « ethical principles ». They are not concrete rules of action, but express valuable aspects of the good life that must be preserved.

These aspects are not necessarily regarded as the only aspects of the human person's life, but they can be aspects of our biological and social life, and even of our life with other living beings ; they can be aspects of the whole living world, insofar as it is a system of resources and of life.

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, « Droits de l'homme et bonne volonté », in *Entre nous, Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre* (Paris : Bernard Grasset, 1991) : 231-235.