

The Moral Compass Project consists of six subprojects, all of which are described here below.

Subproject 1: Detachment and Ethical Reflection

Dr. Rob Compaijen

As reflective creatures, we are able to take a step back, leave behind the immediacy of our experiences of the world and of ourselves, and look at them, as it were, from the outside. We can describe this way of transcending our present point of view as 'detachment'. Interestingly, in ethics, detachment seems both necessary and perilous.

Detachment is *necessary* because we do not want to be caught up in parochialism and prejudice. It is *perilous* because, adopting a detached point of view, we might be tempted to doubt the meaning and value of anything – thereby running the risk of evoking nihilism.

The fundamental topic that informs this research project, then, is the role that detachment should play in ethical reflection. The main question that I explore in this research project is: what role should detachment play in our reflections on (our experience of) moral value?

This question arises against the background of a radical scepticism about the place of value in a world that, according to the sceptic, is thoroughly disenchanting. The idea is this. Moral experience suggests that moral value is part of the world. Goodness, cruelty, kindness, injustice and so forth are experienced as features of (persons, acts, or situations in) the world. However, while this is suggested by our moral experience, there is a dominant sceptical view that denies that they are, in fact, part of the world. This view, arising out of a strongly detached standpoint, argues that we might *experience* the goodness of certain acts, but, of course, they are not 'in themselves' good.

Like other values, so the argument goes, goodness is something we project onto the world, because the world in itself is an empty place. This detached scepticism about the

reality of value is informed, then, by the influential idea that our world is a disenchanted place.

In the project, I will critically engage with this sceptical line of thought, exploring the twofold hypothesis (1) that, while radical detachment makes value invisible, ethical reflection on value requires a kind of 'detached engagement' with the world, and (2) that attention, as envisaged by Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil, is the prime example of such 'detached engagement'.

Subproject 2: Law and Virtue in the Protestant Tradition

Dominique Klamer (PhD), supervisors: prof. Pieter Vos & prof. Maarten Wisse

Since a few decades, virtue ethics has been on a revival. In virtue ethics a teleological conception of the human being is presupposed, in which the human being is aimed at realizing the good life and the common good. What the good is can be known and discovered by our human nature (natural law) or can be found in shared practices and traditions. Virtue ethics is rearticulated in contrast to modern ethics, which focuses rather on 'general principles' which, regardless of practices and traditions, should lead to just and right moral actions.

Often, the Reformation is seen as the origin of modern ethics, in which the connection has been lost between Gods revealed law and the universal recognizability of the good, as well as between commandments and virtues (Alasdair MacIntyre, Brad Gregory). The question is whether this interpretation is correct. Post-Reformation theologians from Reformed scholasticism in particular, developed their ethics on the basis of both divine law and the virtues. In their writings, natural law, virtues and the general recognizability of the good are all present. At the same time they renewed the tradition, on the one hand by correcting classical virtue ethics from Biblical revelation, on the other hand with an open eye towards modernity.

The continuity and discontinuity between post-Reformation theology and medieval scholasticism has already been investigated on various themes, but still unexplored is the way in which these post-Reformation theologians connect divine law, human law and virtue. The importance of research into the field of post-Reformation ethics is that a significant link can be found between the classical Christian ethical tradition and modernity. Therefore, the aim of this research is threefold. First, it is aimed at

reconstructing the way in which these theologians connect the Reformed emphasis on the Decalogue with classical virtue ethics, and what their views are about the human ability to know the good, despite the sinful nature of the human being. Second, the aim is to *deconstruct* the dominant narrative that the Reformation has been a major factor in the breakdown of the tradition. Finally, this project *constructively* examines how post-Reformation theological thought on law and virtue can be made fruitful in our time.

Subproject 3: Spinoza and Gunning as Discussion Partners in Modernity

PhD Project starting in 2020, linked to the research of prof. Maarten Wisse

Spinoza, in his work, has thoroughly thought about ethics and given it a place in his view on the relationship between God and the world. In his ethics, divine and human law become very closely related. Like no one else, the nineteenth-century theologian J.H. Gunning jr. sought the conversation with the philosophy of Spinoza, because in his time he saw the dominant role of Spinoza's thinking in society and culture. Gunning has, on the one hand, tried to fully understand Spinoza and, on the other hand, offered a Christian alternative to his philosophy.

With Spinoza, divine law comes so close to human law that they almost coincide. In opposition to Spinoza's view, Gunning means that God a person who is over against us. The freedom that Spinoza values so much, is only available to us if a transcendent Someone over against us exists. If we really want to become who we are, we can only do so by being addressed by Someone else. Gunning had a good sense of what happened in the Enlightenment and how Spinoza's thinking developed into a world view in the nineteenth century.

The goal of this project is, on the one hand, to understand how Gunning used Spinoza to be in conversation with his contemporary culture, but on the other hand to 'translate' Gunning to our own context. Gunning entered into a dialogue with Spinoza under the conditions of his own time. Gunning's personalism for example, is less current today than it was then. Nevertheless, a dominant group of philosophers and neuroscientists that does not believe that complete freedom exists in our time. Their views have been criticized in various ways, yet in the German-speaking field of philosophy various arguments have been developed that resemble Gunning's thinking, but incorporate the

idea of personal relationship with God that constitutes us, yet in a new way. This research aims to contribute to these research fields in a constructive way.

Subproject 4: Freedom of speech

Postdoc project starting in 2022, with dr. Klaas-Willem de Jong

Until recently, we did not know words like fake news. We now realize that we have been overwhelmed for years, especially since the rapid growth of modern social media, but also before social media became important as sources of information. Fake news is of all times. Nevertheless, many now experience fake news as one of the greatest threats to society. Should we ban and forbid fake news?

According to Spinoza in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, freedom of expression is the condition for living together in obedience to God and in peace. In this way, this condition-creating freedom gets an implicit theological basis, which Spinoza easily exchanges for a philosophical one: "Either we accept Spinoza's theology, or we accept his philosophy." (A.C.M. Roothaan, *Piety, Peace, Freedom*) An interpretation of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam 1996), 15).

In his time, Spinoza had every reason to advocate for the freedom of expression. It seems that our time also gives reasons for that again. Fundamental and human rights, with all their limitations - too Western, too focused on the individual, and so on - are seen as an important, if not universal, basis for peaceful coexistence. Often, as in the Dutch Constitution, we see that the principle of equality is paramount and the other rights are read by those glasses: the canon in the canon. But is this the only possible approach? I think there are other approaches possible.

The central question in this research is how the freedom of expression can become a theologically founded lens or condition for other fundamental and human rights. This leads to the following sub-questions: first, what exactly is the position of the freedom of expression (and the underlying freedom of conscience) in Spinoza's work? Second, which *theological* arguments form the basis of his viewpoint? Third, how can his views on this freedom be of any service to a contemporary theologically inspired consideration of fundamental and human rights in light of the freedom of speech? And finally, what consequences does this have for dealing with these rights?

Subproject 5: Theological Perspectives on Family Responsibility

PhD Project starting in 2019/20, supervisor: dr. Petruschka Schaafsma & prof. Maarten Wisse

Do we have a special responsibility for family members? The government and healthcare institutions seem to assume that this is the case, especially now that the welfare state is waning. The blood relationship, or a lasting partner relationship, is then normative. In the meantime, the blood tie and sustainable relations are questioned as to their normativity for family law. Instead the reality of the actual caring relationship has become a crucial factor in determining rights and duties of family members.

It is clear that two views of a 'moral compass' are at stake here that cannot simply be traced back to each other: founded in a 'natural' family tie, or rather in an intensive kind of care relationship. This ambiguity is the reason for this project. The strong appeal to the family tie needs a convincing substantiation. How could this be given? Are the options mentioned the only ones, and are they convincing? Can the appeal to a family tie be substantiated or explained? Is it not primarily an expression of a mystery that we experience as somehow given? And to what extent should we take this experience ethically seriously?

The first step of the research consists of further analyzing the aforementioned ambiguity in the public domain, varying from legislation to policy of care institutions and public debate. In a second step, this current situation is associated with prevailing ethical views on family responsibility from within and outside theology. Also among ethicists, the emphasis is on either the blood tie or the special relationship that is created by a shared history and care for each other. Do these visions help to better understand the current situation? In the third step, the illuminating power of the notion of a 'moral compass' in this area is further investigated, with special attention to possible theological elaborations.

Subproject 6: Medical Ethics around the End of Life

Dr. Stef Groenewoud & prof. Theo Boer

Medical ethics is an area in which the experienced relativity of ethical norms comes to the fore. In the absence of more or less objective moral values, disputes are settled either by describing them in merely technical terms or by referring to the individual autonomy of citizens. Even if these disputes seem to be conveying a sense of objectivity, they actually leave a number of important ethical values unexposed, such as the value of community and the value of vulnerability.

One area in which this comes to particular expression concerns the end of life. What does it mean that many people understand an organized death to be equivalent to a dignified death? And what does it mean that people are increasingly advocating physician assisted death not in order to escape a terrible death, but rather to forgo a dreaded life? It is precisely in the matter of the end of life that we seem to detect a confrontation between arguments from the Enlightenment – ‘plausible to every right-minded person’ – and arguments from religion – ‘incomprehensible and unworldly’.

In this subproject, we explore the role religious arguments play in the euthanasia debate and how these religious arguments relate to non-religious arguments. The study has both an empirical part (‘How do people think about the relationship between these arguments?’) and a normative/systematic part (‘How can we best construe the relationship between the two types of arguments?’). A unique heuristic source for this project are experiences of prof. Boer during his ten-year tenure as a member of the Regional Review Committee on Euthanasia, in the course of which he reviewed about 4,000 euthanasia reports.