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Micro-Ethics for Nice People

In this very strange place

Italy is a strange country, and, being a strange place, it has always been loved by strangers who may feel a kind of affinity for this place. Throughout the course of history, they have been called barbarians, tourists, and immigrants; all variations mean people that come here from far away, an uninterrupted flow of desire in action, of people in search of something. But in the end, we are all a bit foreign, a bit strange. One of my grandmothers came here at the beginning of last century as a child from Romania, the daughter of my great-grandmother who had emigrated from Friuli to Romania and then returned back; another, in the meantime, came from São Paolo in Brazil. Throughout the years, people met in our harbours and what started as a temporary journey becomes a more or less permanent existence here. We become citizens, without even realizing it.

Decide in which direction to look

I am sure that most of all people are nice people, who take care the best way they can, in everyday life, without making the news. Just imagine watching the news telling: "Today millions of people went to work, took their children to school, without any sort of incident." Why does it seem like a joke, given that these are simple facts?

Our selective perception focuses on some aspects – or others – of reality, which means it selects, by ignoring everything else. This natural phenomenon happens unnoticed: we cannot be aware of what we do not notice. It is the way we direct our selective perception that creates the characteristics of the place we live in. A place with a lot of nice people, engaging themselves voluntarily, for example. Or a place full of anxiety and fear, where people believe that the bad news on TV and newspapers reflect reality, and not just a negative selection of it. But we always live in exactly the reality we believe we live in: it is very important to notice how our mind creates just how we feel.

Good news make no news, what works is usually taken for granted. As human beings we tend to look for the better: we look for Good as a project, as a vision opposite to bad – as a result our perception is much more sensitive to what does not work. In my opinion this is due to evolution: it is necessary, in order to survive, to notice what is *not* the way we need it to be, and take care of it. We are very sensitive to the concept of justice, for example, which demonstrates, in my eyes, our general tendency towards Good.

How to become a decent society (without waiting for the Martians)

This little book is dedicated to the nice people all over the world, those that do not make the news, hoping that it may help us all to reflect on our self-esteem as humans and the value of our contribution to make this a decent and desirable society.

Overall, if you think about it, the so-called "immigrants" of this world do not really exist. To call them immigrants is to make a very broad generalization and it grossly oversimplifies the matter. In fact, none of the "subcategories" of people – Italians, Tuscans, Venetians, and Finnish – exist. They are all abstractions formed on the belief that people who have lived for some time in a "nation" (another abstraction!) have characteristics in common. And certainly this is true in some sense: they have a common language, something often used as a frame, a reference point when comparing one country to another.
Human beings feel the need to define themselves, to belong to different social groups.
Defining ourselves as part of the human race would, for example, only make sense if we were comparing ourselves to Martians, as humans often feel the need to seal themselves off from "the others", creating community through distinction.
So if these Martians, or other inhabitants from a faraway galaxy, decided to attack us, would that finally produce a sense of solidarity among us inhabitants of Earth?
Do we really need to wait for another galaxy to become interested in us before we feel like we are all part of the same species?

Taken individually, no one, neither an "Italian" nor an "immigrant" really defines himself through these abstract subcategories, however, everyone feels himself to be a human being, with the typical characteristics of our species.
That is what we all have in common. So let's start off there: what are those characteristics?

Some of the characteristics of human beings

Human beings substitute instinct (which guides other animals to their function in nature) with culture. Culture shapes the choices we make in our daily existence and helps us give meaning to our realities and our experiences.
We are not condemned (as animals are) to live on auto-pilot, tied to our pre-determined function in nature; rather, we have the ability to reflect, imagine alternatives, invent, choose new paths, have preferences, and evaluate the costs, both economic and social, of our preferences.

Let's take the example of the so-called immigrants. They have paid a high to come here, leaving their loved ones and familiar places behind, and we can therefore assume that they have a strong motivation to lead a peaceful life.

We are the only living beings who believe we have been thrown out of paradise. To come up with this certainly took a great deal of imagination. Consequently we compare it to what we see all around us. Probably, we will find we do not actually live in paradise. Nevertheless, it still is in our power to imagine that same paradise. We can do so highlighting the short-comings of our current environment, or we can imagine it in order to do our very best to construct a world that, step by step, heads in that direction. If we can already imagine paradise in our minds, then we can achieve it little by little here on earth.

The web of needs and meanings

We human beings live in a web of meanings and concepts that we have invented: usually we do not even realize it, as we inherited these parameters from the cultural tradition in which we were raised. These innate notions of "Italian", "foreigner" and "European" exist due to the human need to understand things, to share knowledge of the world, and to describe it in a simplifying manner everyone can understand. We find relief in the ability to imagine common characteristics, even those tied to something as solid as a birthplace or a "nation" – that institutionalized form of community that was invented in the course of history.

These "national identities" are generalizations, cultural inventions, and prejudices that save us from the difficult task of getting to know everyone on a personal level, a level that involves paying real attention to their feelings. Our minds cannot avoid these generalizations, and as our minds are always in search of ways to understand the world around us while saving energy in doing so, we tend to use these shortcuts.

It is as if we walked around and labelled everything in the world with a sticker, just to be sure that everyone knows its name, with particular attention given to the things that cannot be seen, like abstract concepts. But we can also be conscious of this tendency to label things, and we can put the labels in quotation marks, to make it clear that we are aware of our subjectivity.

A small intercultural story: a European doctor explains to a group of African natives that it is necessary to wash your hands well in order to eliminate microbes and bacteria that, though invisible, are very dangerous. One of the natives laughs and says, "Doctor, don't worry, we don't believe in evil spirits any longer!"

Language welcomes us

Human languages act as an interface between the subjects that use them and their society, thus, the experiences made by individuals can be expressed and shared with everyone, and can indeed be understood better through reflection and discussion with others.

When we are born, language is already there welcoming us, and it will outlive us as well. Nevertheless, we are the ones speaking, listening, and assigning meaning to language, i.e. to what other people say; and we are also the ones learning new languages.

Learning a new language means entering a new web of meanings and concepts, only partially translatable into other languages, which means that every language has its own way of seeing and labeling things. Consequently, speaking more than one language helps us see the arbitrariness of language and the beauty of naming things and social imaginations, thus knitting the colorful web of our linguistic interconnection.

And if people were rare?

Human beings are imaginative and precious, even if we often do not realize it; in fact, too often we hold on to the destructive habit of underestimating ourselves and others. Let's try a mental experiment: could we stop that destructive habit?

Let's say that there are fewer people being born. Eventually no one would accept to be mistreated at work, nor would they allow a lack of respect, because trustworthy and sensible people were in fact very rare, and they were the most important element in a company, a corporation, a country. Therefore a new kind of social competence would be en vogue: directors and CEOs would need to build a climate of constructive communication with their employees, otherwise these would leave for other, more respectful work-places.

We will finally realize that destructive behaviour, verbal abuse and moral molestation are a kind of atmospheric pollution. Not so long ago, it was considered normal to smoke in the office, while nowadays its noxiousness is general knowledge. It is definitely going to be the same with incompetent social communication, which creates sufferings, as well as conflicts, polluted interpersonal atmosphere, and is as achy as smoke in the eyes.

Imagination and desires

Human beings are characterized by their valuating of and giving meaning to everything. Their life is led by their needs and desires. A strong desire is the need to affiliation, to share meanings, to understand each other and the world they live in and its rules.

Culture supplies the frame within which we assign meanings. Thus we create a map, guiding us through and giving sense to our everyday life. We hope to be understood and accepted by others, and respected by them as members of the society we live in. Usually we have the ambition to be considered as reliable members with positive features: nice people.

If it is true that "the lack of an appropriate cultural transmission causes (…) disorientation, hostility and anger" (Mantovani, 2005), the new situation which has been emerging for a couple of years, where a growing number of people from different countries live together in the same places, can cause stress.

Unless we consider this new situation as a challenge and take it on: in order to observe how our mind creates the filters that are the typical products of every culture. Our mind can reflect about its mechanisms without taking them for granted. No matter where we come from, we can reflect about the way we think, about the cultural frames shaping our thinking.

Every culture is based on beliefs which channel evaluations and meanings; we do not comprehend reality in itself, but create an image of it through the very words we use to describe it. I may say my neighbour is shy because he passes by with his head down and barely says hallo or that he is rude because he barely says hallo and does not even look at me. It is my own choice to interpret him with benevolence or not.

We label others and create our own opinion about them, we do not react to their actual words or actions but to the meaning we give to their words or actions. We create these meanings ourselves, through our mental filters.

The maps we use to give meaning to our experience are related to our culture.

Our present cultural system can be defined as "loose." This constitutes an advantage if it gives us the opportunity to observe just how our mind uses its filters of beliefs and convictions in order to give meanings to things.

We can practice observing our mental categories and decide, if necessary, to change our assumptions.

Reflecting means thinking about improvements, and thus means caring about what is good: comparing things as they are to our preferences. Our basic preference is leading a good life.

Reflecting is thus an ethical activity based on human imagination, which describes the ability to imagine potentials. The concept of a potential means, that something does not yet exist. Still, we are free to envision it, and to wish one another the best we can come up with.

The ethnographic view

In everyday life, which has become an intercultural life, we can practice a tool called "ethnographic look" (see picture at page 18) in order to see how our mind creates the emotions it creates, on the basis of what interpretations and meanings it gives to our perceptions of the reality surrounding us.

In order to exist, multicultural citizens need to consider the different cultures as historical options, traditional ways to manage human beings' needs, including the need for shared meanings, in order to overcome their ambition to prevail on others. This ambition can be explained through a fundamental need of human beings, the need to feel that our own interpretation of reality is the right one.

Reality is what it is – our perception of reality is selective (who knows what we do not see?), so our perception is always just our own perception.

Also our emotions are what they are: when I am happy my emotions are different from when I am sad, and between the two there are thousands of intermediate stages. This is a physiological reality, a natural condition of my body.

Our interpretation serves as a switch between these two realities (perception and emotion): it is at this stage that I can intervene, observing my, with sympathy and impartiality, my human being's mind. And check what filters – fundamental assumptions, certainties and convictions, fears and desires – it uses in order to give exactly that meaning, out of all possible meanings.

By training myself through the tool of the ethnographic view I can soon realize that the emotions I feel are signs that inform me whether the things I perceive, due to my filters and thus from my point of view, endanger me or not.

And instead of getting angry and blaming someone else, for example, I can ask my emotion, say, dear dissatisfaction: what need shall I exactly take care of?

For example: I talk to a friend about a project I have; I notice "she makes a funny face" and am disappointed: I think she is not interested.

Through the ethnographic look I can observe, in slow-motion, and analyze the three steps my mind takes within an instant:
- I see: my friend's reaction;
- I interpret: "she is not interested in what I am saying";
- my emotional reaction: I am disappointed.

By giving that meaning to what I see, I myself trigger my emotional reaction. I give meanings by comparing what I see to my mental filters, made up by my expectations towards the world. If I expect instant support from my friend, her reaction will disappoint me all the more.

What I see is what I see, what I feel is what I feel, but the meaning I give is my own creation, deriving from my very own thoughts and preferences.

From now on, whenever I feel a negative emotion, I know it is a sign and I may observe closely:
- what meanings am I giving;
- to what exactly;
- on the basis of which expectations exactly?

Maybe my friend had just remembered something important to her that she had forgotten to do, while listening to me, who knows. I can ask her, without any assumptions.

By training ourselves to observe our way of assigning meaning to what surrounds us through the "ethnographic view" we become aware of our self-referentiality: we realize that our accusations are due to our mental filters, our expectations about the way things and people "should be", according to us. We may then help create a world free from recriminations and blame – and find out that these are often unexpressed desires turned bad. Anger often hides needs which could not be expressed in an appropriate way. We have the right to express our desires, but not to see them come true in exactly the way we wanted to. If we do not live in order to make others' desires come true, we can easily accept them to live the same way; everyone lives according to one's own desires. And among these desires is the one to feel at ease with others, that is to say the need for common well-being.

The advantage of prejudice

Life in "auto-pilot", led by prejudices which every culture creates traditionally, is more comfortable because it does not require us to use our mind or to observe how we do it. Nonetheless, in a multicultural reality a life led by prejudices has more limits than advantages. If we live with prejudice and consider our culture to be competing against others, we will live on alert: our need to be understood can never be fulfilled, since competitiveness in itself means a fight for predominance, which creates anxiety.

The disadvantage of anxiety

When we live in mistrust and in anxiety, in trouble and in fear towards one another, then it is high time for all of us to ask ourselves if it is possible to get rid of prejudices which are at the root of these feelings. If we do not, our life will soon be led by fear, we will give meanings led by fear, we will defend ourselves and live on alert, and will thus contribute to the creation of the vicious circles of a mistrusting and fearful world.

In such a world, there is no room for trust, so uneasiness spreads. But without confidence exchange between humans is not possible; and without exchange we cannot live properly, as we are social animals interconnected in solving one another's problems: no one produces his own shoes, clothes, writes the book he reads and makes the movies he watches, creates his own computer and his own electricity to make it work, build his own house with his own hands and with the bricks he

himself has made, produces the things he eats and drinks, nor the language he speaks.

Without a basic confidence I could not even take a bus driven by another person, in traffic made up of thousands of other people who, I trust, want to reach their destination just as safely as I do.
That is why if we live in fear, in mistrust and in anxiety we cannot live properly, in a society which seems hospitable to us.

Alternative options of realities

Human mind observes reality and constantly creates alternative options: on the one hand it sees things as they are (or believes it sees things as they are, but we feel no difference between "**seeing**" and "**believing** to see"!), on the other hand it immediately compares them to how-things-should-be-instead. This is only possible through human imagination, our ability to imagine alternatives to the things which simply are the way they are: we imagine, for instance, a better society.

In our way to see things we constantly appreciate and depreciate: we can thus say that the human culture basically has a seed of opposition, of resistance to things which simply are-as-they-are, no matter what our preferences are.
We, human beings, evaluate them, compare them to our ideas of how-they-should-be-instead and usually like our own ideas more than reality.
Depreciating is the first step to act on things, for example, to feel the right to pull up the grass that we call "weeds" and that we can or better "have to" pull up just because we call it that way.
Believing, like hoping or fearing gives life to personal alternative mental worlds.
If I say "my son is cooking tonight" the truth of the sentence depends on things which are not related to me and that I cannot be in control of: my son may be cooking, or may be not. If I say "I believe my son is cooking tonight" this sentence is always true-for-me: if I believe it I believe it, no matter what will happen and what worlds the others will give life to through their decisions. The responsibility of my mental status in "believing x" and of my following decisions is mine. I myself create a world where I believe x. Similarly, in religious belief, the quality of my feeling is mine, is part of my mental and physical status, just like "my own" toothache: as long as I feel it, it is part of my reality. I can live driven by benevolence due to an explicit or an implicit choice (habit), independently from believing or not in a revealed truth or in another one. Through emotional contagion I may infect others.

Desires as a struggle against reality

As human beings, we have desires; desires refer to imagination: imagination of something that is-not-yet, which otherwise would not be a

desire but something already given, an existing situation that no human mind would feel the need to "desire". Thus, desires basically try to "force" reality into a certain direction: the direction we desire, hope, and plan.

This mental position of basic contrast, of resistance to the world-as-it-is, which is typical of constantly desiring human beings, has been mitigated, in the past, by religions, which try to bring people to be satisfied with what they have and what they are, often catalyzing cooperative behavior.

Managing the typically human dissatisfaction?

Throughout history the authorities of the different religions have tried to manage the intrinsic dissatisfaction which is typical of human beings and to prevent it from turning immediately into "action", with its unpredictable consequences. If things are not always as we hope they are, then we have an alternative to action: we can pray, which is different from thinking.

Praying is sort of a wish; but in order to wish a status we need to be able to imagine it, and thus need to feel it, within us: consequently, if we pray we feel better. The more intensely we evoke the positive status that we wish, for ourselves or for others, and the stronger a divine presence we know we can turn to, the better we feel. We are pleased to feel that we have someone on our side who has the power to help us.

Yet all religions can be dangerous: as they are firm beliefs in things that cannot be proven, they may cause harsh conflicts against those who share other beliefs and they accustom to the feeling of being comforted instead of thinking by ourselves.

Being able to worry and to take care

Anyway praying is a rare consolation. Today many enact a destructive variant of praying instead: worrying. In this mental status we can imagine different versions of the future at the same time – the one we wish and the one we fear. We usually concentrate on the latter. If we remember that worry can be interpreted as a variant of praying and of wishing, every time we feel we are getting worried we can switch to the positive action of wishing, or praying.

Those who are able to worry may also use their imagination in a better manner and experience a positive alternative to worrying: taking care of their life, of their dreams, of beloved people, of others.

The shared "frame": what is "normal"?

Appreciating and depreciating things is fundamental to our human activity of giving sense and meaning, starting from a reference culture, from a "frame": this frame tells us what "is normal", i.e. the "background" of beliefs shared by "everybody".

But beliefs are no longer shared by everyone: we know several revealed truths, which gives them all a relative value.

As every human culture has created its own idea of divinity, it would be

possible to agree on accepting the thousand names of God and their interpretations, as long as they do not damage others – as we do not quarrel about calling Rome Roma, for instance, and nobody would ever want to oblige people who speak a different language to call a town in its language.

A similar suggestion may be made by someone who does not identify himself with his original frame, who observes all the religions with distance, all the different ways human beings have referred to the so-called spirituality, similarly to the concept of possibility: it exists only for those who believe in its existence.

Revealed truth for an infant society?

All religions have in common the fact that they are based on "truths" which have been revealed by a transcendent authority that does not explain these truths with argumentations that can be understood by everyone. These authorities validate them simply in saying that they are valid. Only if I interpret the truth as revealed and unquestionable I see it as such: a self-referential assumption of meaning, resistant to reasoning.

Religious argumentations cannot thus be measured by rational ones. Faith cannot be explained or proven, since those who talk about it as believers refer to something which basically does not exist in the personal reality of non-believers. It is necessary for every religion to acknowledge an authority, the authority that reveals the entity believed in.

We sometimes act the same way with little children. We sometimes do not tell them the good reasons of the rules we teach them. We simply tell them "do it like this", implying "because I am telling you to and because I am the boss here". When children grow older they need rational and comprehensible argumentations in order to understand the shared sense of the rules of the social game, to be able to identify themselves with them, to assimilate themselves and to become independent adults and constructive members of society.

Using one's own head

People who get accustomed to accept authority get accustomed not to use their own head completely, not even to imagine that they can think of alternatives to those given by the authority of their religion.

This limits our potentials. Human beings are defined through their creativity, curiosity, both aimed at making a better world, through their proverbial restlessness. We can do it if we use our head with courage and benevolence, if we reflect and observe how we reflect, from which implicit assumptions, which motivations we are guided.

Accepting authorities that are not rationally legitimated in a comprehensible way can be harmful for human society, as we risk giving traditional institutions a stronger power than the advantage they create, anchoring its value, which lies in the "trust" in the tradition, which only

perpetuates old creations – which are not necessarily better than tomorrow's potentials - of human minds of the past. Since every generation has the ability to reflect, it may ask itself which solutions of the past are still useful today and on which innovations it is worth working together.

The intelligence of being responsible for one's own actions

If we believe in authority we could think that we may not-be responsible for our actions by saying, for instance, "I simply obeyed". This was the answer of Nazi defendants at Nuremberg Trials. If we act this way, we choose to be irresponsible people, who believe they do not have to answer for their actions and decisions. An adult human being who can use his/her mental faculties is supposed to answer for his/her actions and choices, to face the consequences, economically and socially. Those who try to avoid this suggest a concept of an unlivable society: they act in a way contrary to their own interests, if their interest is to live in a decent, civil society, where it is possible to trust in other people's constructive motivations and intentions.

There is no point, as a matter of fact, hoping that other people's attitude towards us is better than ours towards them.

If one hurts others he actually acts as a fool, as he damages his own interests.

I do not think that one decides to act as a fool on purpose; but, on the contrary, one can decide not to.

Sadness as aversion

Another disadvantage of believing in authorities: we do the things we would do anyway reluctantly, because we think we "have" to do them. This is a major waste: if we are alive we have made it up to this point and could be glad, if only we were aware of that and started to focus on what is going well in our life; yet we are often sad, oppressed, anxious.

Sadness is a form of aversion: it is more easily accepted by society than plain complaints and accusations, it is a form of resistance to things as they are, a limiting resistance that, in addition, does not make us active as desires, which would push us to act in order to reach our aim.

Our sadness informs us that we are considering the world that surrounds us as different from the world we would rather live in: what does this sadness inside us want us to do? What changes does it want us to make for our sake? And how can you think, dear sadness within us, that we lack the potentials to get there? If we can imagine that things "should" be different we can also imagine how we can contribute changing them, without harming anyone.

The habit of complaining can turn into destructive cynicism, which is typical for those who experience dissatisfaction in a situation of relative wealth, to which they have got accustomed. The cynic is thus no longer able to notice his wealth and focuses on problems without enough

motivation to get up and do something about it.

It can grow into a constant bitterness, which makes us depreciate what surrounds us and which we take for granted. The antidote: remember to feel grateful for the things that we cannot see, just because they are going the way we want them to.

The emotional contagion

The emotional contagion can be explained by the activity of the "mirror neurons." It spreads bad feelings and the habit to rash criticism and negative attitudes, to aversion as a prevailing mood. How does it feel to spend hours listening to "nigglers"? Afterwards we complain about them to others: we have been hit by the emotional contagion! We walk around with other people's aversion, distributing it abundantly throughout the world. This is not a call to "positive thinking" but to reflection, which means willingly turning one's attention to both what is "going well" and to one's feeling of aversion, when it arrives, and not to its alleged "causes". The emotions we feel are signs that want to be taken seriously and acted upon: we either change our choices connected to the things which "annoy us", if we accept to pay an alternative's price, or we change our way of interpreting things. Love it or leave it!

Deciding to count

Every choice we make creates a possible world. For instance, I can activate a world in which I get on the bus or another one in which I go back home to take the sunglasses I have forgotten – and I do not know the potential variables to which I thus open or close the door (if I go back home I may, for example, get a phone call, if I get on the bus I may meet someone; in the second case I may create a world in which I talk to this person or another one in which I say hello and pass by in a hurry, thus missing some information that I could have received, and so on). This is also valid *for every interpretative choice we make*, the choice I have to give a meaning x, or y or z to things. We always have more choices than we think we have. The philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell calculated that if we think we have 3 alternatives we actually have at least 2^3 alternatives, if we think we have 4 alternatives then we have 2^4, and so on. That is to say we always have 2^n alternatives, if we see n possibilities. If we see 3 there will actually be 8, if we see 2, we will have 4, if we see 4, they will actually be 16. Mathematics, in this case, helps us open our mind to the numerous potentialities we usually do not see. To train ourselves to be free to choose.

The minimal choice: avoid harming

Since German Nazism we know how humanity, human kind's nature, may also include monstrousness. It implies the possibility of setting our conscience "on hold" through the concept of obedience, avoiding thus to

take responsibility for our actions, it implies indifference, ignoring our natural empathy, despite empathy being a defining characteristic of ours: we all feel needs and desires, we all feel sympathy and sometimes share what we have with others, while a dog does not share its bone with other dogs. Dogs may not even imagine something like sharing bones; they do not produce potentiality, as imagination, a basic ingredient of potentiality, is a product of the human mind.

Thus, we can imagine (and make) a better world.

We can consciously decide to use our mind and heart to find peaceful means for a civil coexistence starting from where we are, now, here. Peaceful means, i.e. not harming or damaging anyone and anything, not to let others pay the price of our ambitions and our desires.

The relief of giving up being right

Who gets used to observing with benevolence the way human beings' minds operate, can propose giving up revealed truths since these cannot help but generate hostility between the different competing truths. However, each metaphysics, anything which human beings may believe in, is part of a practical anthropology, as it concerns human beings imagining, believing, and discussing it.

If an idea is based upon the faith in a revealed truth it is neither rationally explainable nor comprehensible to people who do not share the belief. The emerging conflict only leads to the attempt of dominating each other, or else through abandonment of the need to dominate, accepting other people's truths just as what they are: other people's truths.

If one opts for domination, the situation of conflict remains more or less latent, perpetuating malaise and combat. Therefore, if we are looking for peaceful coexistence, the only viable option is giving up the very idea of domination.

Empathy-a-priori, an elementary feeling

We need much more than mere tolerance in order to live in a society based on what I like to call empathy-a-priori: that is, what human beings feel when they are peaceful enough to "put themselves in someone else's shoes". Nobody "feels" the cold, toothache, pain of others, but everyone can imagine it and, in fact, if the "other" is a loved one we care as if those aches were ours. Why cannot other "others" be dear to me? Enough at least to avoid harming them?

Who does not live empathy-a-priori does not act consistently with his/her own interests and does not therefore behave in a rational way.

We all wish to live in a world in which well-being is widely spread, with no need to beware of others and of harm. Each of us prefers feeling good than bad so we can generalize, imagining this is valid for everyone else as well. Who does not live empathy-a-priori – and does not wonder how others feel imagining the consequences of his/her choices – harm himself/herself as well as others, behaves in a socially incompetent way,

ignoring the so-called soft skills, because he/she increases the overall necessity to beware of others in the world.

Who does not live empathy-a-priori also harms his/her own world, because if he/she behaves that way, he/she knows there are people who behave the same, starting with him/her, the only person he/she will be with for all of his/her life. However, nobody decides to live empathy for rational reasons, but as a personal choice. A priori, precisely, in order to become the nice person we prefer to be.

A shared basic: wishing Good to ourselves

Thanks to empathy-a-priori we have a least common denominator: if we do not wish ourselves and our loved ones any harm we can feel, or at least imagine to feel, this is a basic need, shared by everyone.

Everyone could agree that in the name of *nothing*, therefore not even in the name of an authority or religion should it be legitimate to harm others. A violence that can also consist in impairing others from making their own choices, in living their life as active and responsible subjects.

We can agree on avoiding harming others without referring to any religion, any authority, instead taking our human being's experience seriously: human beings with the preference of feeling good. Who are able to feel – if they want to – that this is valid for everyone.

Human beings have a right to see their most fundamental needs – first of which is feeling good – respected. And the fundamental, major need of all the members of our species is living the best way they can. A need we rationally understand thanks to basic empathy, based on taking seriously our need of (feeling) good.

An elementary micro-ethics

We can create an elementary ethics based on the respect of people's needs, which we can feel, thank to elementary empathy, starting from our own subjective experience.

If we realize that behind each accusation lies a need of the person expressing it, we could listen to the needs of the others and our own ones, almost without making any difference between the various needs involved. We can then try to explore the ways to succeed and answer the following questions together:

- What do we need to live well, that depends on our own responsibility?
- How can we take care of human restlessness, of our dissatisfaction, without blaming, recriminating, attacking the others (since, thank to our direct experience, we know how it feels to be on the defense), instead realizing our choices with full awareness of our responsibilities as well as of their cost to others?
- Is there something we may all trust in? A "least common denominator"?

- I believe it is possible to find answers if we think about what everyone wishes for himself/herself and for his or her children. Which expectations do we share? What do we wish for our human family?

The heritage of the Enlightenment

In Europe the legacy of the Enlightenment is something we got used to, something we rarely perceive but give for granted. It is nonetheless a great legacy. It may be unthinkable for today's civil society how revolutionary the appeal of a philosopher was who, at the end of the 18th century, invited people to use their own mind and defeat ignorance. The belief in the potential of mankind's rationality, in our ability to learn, think and resolve conflicts by listening to one another's sensible arguments is a value we inherited from the Enlightenment. These values can teach us how to live in peace respecting human beings' needs. Among them however, we can also find the need for authority: revealed truths, unshakeable beliefs, both in the religious and political domain, satisfy our need of belonging: a social libido.

Revealed truths, nonetheless, are not compatible with the need for autonomy and free thinking. That is why a conflict may arise between our need of feeling free and our desire to belong to a political party or to enjoy undeniable truths that support us. The price of undeniable truths, however, is our inability to discuss them.

We do not need ideology: from a scientific point of view, empathy is based on mirror-neurons. We are glad that the scientific community confirms our very perception of what we feel.

Our mind is the only thing in the world that can perceive and conceive itself. It is extraordinary to think that in the evolution of animal species nature has finally acquired, thanks to mankind, eyes that see nature itself and themselves. This awareness of ours assigns values to everything while still being able to notice it, choosing to take care of things and people. An awareness that interacts with a whole web of other's awarenesses; communicates, acquires knowledge by learning and by exchanging different points of view.

Evolution never stands still, but its cultural dimension is way faster than its natural counterpart. Biologically, our minds do not differ much from those of our ancestors 40.000 years ago, but we have new concepts, and thus a new thinking, new potentialities, visions, projects and ways to perceive our mind and take care of it.

Values for a decent society

We can share values based on the respect for the needs of all human beings and their basic interests. For example, everyone has an interest in being perceived by others as an active and reliable member of his own community due to the general social need of being accepted by others. Each and every one of us needs to preserve a positive image of oneself. If

we need shared meanings in order to understand the world we live in, we can refer to those every one of us has experienced.

Those who live in fear cannot help but reject solidarity, as they constantly feel the need to defend themselves, they can easily justify their attacks on others.

Indifference to other people's feelings is the opposite of the *empathy-a-priori*, which also exists indeed. Sometimes we feel the need to become impermeable, which might help us understand and accept the fact that others, sometimes, do exactly the same.

However, there is a common ground of basic assumptions we can refer to in order to take care of our need to feel good, which everyone lives out his way.

If I feel upset by someone, I can stop for a moment and ask myself: what is it inside of me that prevents me from accepting him/her for what he/she is and not for what I wish him/her to be? Will my not accepting hurt him/her? Do I feel hurt and not accepted myself?

Empathy-a-priori: basics

We therefore do not need a whole body of regulations, we only need to trust our perception of the way we feel as human beings. As I read somewhere: "we are the others".

If we prefer to rely on shared basics, here are my proposals (to be completed as you like):

- Do not harm anybody or anything: it causes pain, which you know is unpleasant to feel!
- Do not give in to provocations. Provocations and insults exist only as long as you assign this meaning to them. Whoever treats you unfairly surely has his own share of problems or simply a bad day; learn how to let go and to read others' frustrations behind such behaviour and you will be the one feeling better.
- Work for the future: think of the social and economic cost of your choices.
- Learn to be brave and strive to make little things better: you can make a difference more often than you think. There are lots of occasions for small favors, if noticed.
- If you want to express criticism, follow the constructive three-steps-method:
  a) describe what you see,
  b) describe how you feel; others do not know it unless you say it!
  c) describe what you wish (which will of course be different from the way things are) and your reasons for it.
- **Do not give anything for granted and do not make assumptions!**
- If you are not satisfied with the status-quo, use this emerging energy to change things – if there was nothing to change, you would not be upset – and do not waste it making accusations or

complaining, since such a negative attitude only makes you feel powerless and uneasy without any result.

- If you wish to live in a civil society based upon solidarity, you can behave exactly as the nice persons you would like to meet.

In the end: What precisely does it mean not to harm?

It is a matter of interpretation, of assigned meanings, as usual. We cannot help assigning them so we are best off by putting ourselves in the other's position: how would we feel in his/her situation?

The very experience of each of us, of the way we feel, minute after minute, seems to me a good starting point for a daily micro-ethics, regardless of all the interpretations that can be given.

All religions preached it: treat others the way you want them to treat you. There is no need to back it by making reference to revealed truths anymore. Elementary empathy can show us how, day by day.

For further reading:

www.ludovicascarpa.it

(Translation of: Ludovica Scarpa, *Microetica portatile per gente carina*, Arca edizioni, Grosseto, 2008