

Werner Ulrich's Home Page: *Ulrich's Bimonthly*

Formerly "Picture of the Month"

November-December, 2008

***Practical Reason: "Drawing the Future into the Present"***

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***Spe Salvi, or a cloudspotter's Christmas*** OK: I admit it. I am a cloudspotter. Always have been one. Not only since two year's ago, when I discovered Gavin Pretor-Pinney's (2006) beautiful *Cloudspotter's Guide*; oh no, ever since. At least since I was a boy of nine years or so, when I got my first *box camera* and began to spend part of my free time with it. (No need to worry about my childhood though, I *did* spend the larger part of my free time playing street soccer and constructing model aircrafts with the boys of the neighborhood).

Half a century later, on a September afternoon last year, I found myself admiring the clouds in the sky – well, it's not forbidden and it's still free for the moment – and there it was: the cloudspotter's perfect Christmas sky. A quick shot (clouds tend to change their appearance fast) and it was in the box (no longer the Agfa box, to be sure). I had no occasion to use the picture for last year's Christmas season, though, as the "November walk" theme demanded a different illustration. In the present year, too, it looked as if I needed a different picture for the planned final part of the "Reflections on reflective practice" series. However, as this contribution is not ready for publication (see below), I got an unexpected chance to finally use that sky picture, albeit at the price of outing myself as a cloudspotter! But before turning to the topic that goes with the picture, a brief explanation is in order as to how the "Reflections on reflective practice" series will continue.

**"Reflections on reflective practice" series restructured** I had planned to complete the series with a forth and final contribution in November. However, for the first time in the five years since I have had a monthly or bimonthly page, I did not manage to complete the page in due time. In the course of writing I realized that I needed more space than expected to introduce the final topic of how we can learn to practice practical reason.

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Practical reason is an essential but difficult and (to many) rather unfamiliar topic, and I think it merits proper introduction. Moreover, learning to practice a philosophical idea necessarily means to simplify and "pragmatize" it; but before simplifying things, we need to understand them well, otherwise we risk becoming *terribles simplificateurs*. To put it another way, the simplification must come at the end, not at the outset.

I felt like going back all the way and looking anew at the great contributions to practical philosophy and what they have to tell us today. Although I already dedicated two years of my life exclusively to studying the greatest of all practical philosophers, Immanuel Kant, I realize this was 30 years ago and some of his ideas might look different to me today; furthermore, this time I wanted to approach him from the background of the work of Aristotle, who after all is the founder of practical philosophy and whose work on virtue ethics is currently experiencing a certain revival of interest. And of course it would be interesting on this basis to read Habermas again, including his writings on discourse ethics which were not available yet when I wrote *Critical Heuristics*. In short, I decided to review the ideas of Aristotle, Kant, and Habermas, as a way to prepare the ground for the difficult task of pragmatizing practical philosophy for practice. You can be sure that I stick to this end; the idea is not to turn this series into a philosophy seminar but rather, to focus on a few core ideas that these three thinkers have contributed and which may help us in our task. In addition, it may also be helpful if in the course of reviewing their ideas, we get a better grasp of the great line of thought that leads from Ancient Greek virtue ethics to contemporary conceptions of rational ethics and on to what I have proposed to call critical pragmatism.

If you miss in my list the contribution of American Pragmatism, you are absolutely right; I do of course regard it as an important source for learning to practice practical philosophy, but I will deal with it in the final rather than the preparatory essays about which I am talking here.

The series will thus expand from the earlier-planned four to seven contributions, with the current structure of the remaining contributions looking as follows:

- *Reflection 4/7* will offer a general introduction to the notion of "practical philosophy" and then offer an introduction to Aristotelian virtue ethics, the origin of all practical philosophy.
- *Reflections 5/7* and *6/7* will be dedicated to the modern conception of rational ethics, as represented by Kant's practical philosophy and Habermas' discourse ethics.
- *Reflection 7/7*, finally, will return to the previously planned final topic and examine how we might "pragmatize" practical reason so that along with "applied science" and "personal knowledge," it can become the anticipated third pillar of reflective professional practice.

After this clarification, I now invite you to a short reflection on a core theme of the Christian tradition of celebrating Christmas: hope. Of course I will take the opportunity to articulate some thoughts about its importance for practical reason and reflective practice.

**Days of hope** Once again we have experienced a year with plenty of natural and man-made disasters, from floods and earthquakes to the flood of refugees in East Africa and to an unending flood of dismal economic news that started with the subprime crisis in the US, continued with the credit crunch in many countries and has now turned into a severe worldwide economic recession. Millions of people now have to pay the price for the unprecedented dimension of greed and irresponsibility on the part of a privileged small elite of people (who of course haven't understood at all what it means to be an elite, or at least to be paid *as if* they were an elite). The economic crisis thus inevitably goes along with a moral crisis, a loss of faith in our institutions that has taken on an unprecedented dimension, too, and which may be far more difficult to heal and take far more time to overcome than the financial and economic difficulties of the moment.

But we have also seen some very good news in the past year, news that give many people around the globe new hopes; I mean of course the U.S. American presidential election. Like few elections before (I remember the election of Jimmy Carter, which at the time spurred many new hopes, too), this one is inspiring in many people hope for real change; for change that will be substantial, because it is based in a different vision of the future and of the role of the US in it, and which also will reach out to all people and

nations of good will around the globe, because it is grounded in a different spirit and value basis.

An American president who is black (a symbol of change and source of hope in itself), brilliant (another marked change in itself), and breathtakingly bold in his courage and ability to reach out to people and touch them in their hearts – what more could we ask for as a ground for hope, for believing that real change is possible? To be sure, the pressures of *realpolitik* will remain the same as ever; nobody, not even the most brilliant politician, can get "it" (i.e., everything) right for everyone and this within a short term of office. Some disappointments are thus almost unavoidable; but everybody knows that and it does not diminish our hope. There is a magic in President Obama's "*Yes we can!*" that reaches deeper than the usual flood of promises before elections. By touching something essential in the minds and hearts of millions of people, it unfolds a real force, true impetus for change. Sufficient reason, I thought, to deal a little bit with the nature of *hope*: what exactly is it, from what sources does it nourish itself, how does it work?

As chance has it, I have had a little booklet on my shelf since last summer, still unread, which deals with this core Christian topic of the nature of hope. It is Pope Benedict XVI's second Encyclical Letter, dated 30 November 2007. I am neither Catholic nor particularly religious (although I do not mind accompanying my Catholic wife to an occasional church attendance); but this circumstance provides no reason for me not to listen to what a Catholic Pope has to say on the topic. Some years ago I read a few essays written by Benedict XVI (then Cardinal Ratzinger, see, e.g., 1998) about the relation of faith, hope, and reason, and I remember they were philosophically well written and interesting essays. Sufficient reason, then, to turn to this source and draw some inspiration from it. In addition, to situate the Christian message of hope in a wider framework, I have begun to read another booklet that I have had on my shelf for some time, Karl Jasper's (1975) essay on the four prophets *Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus*. I will not comment on this latter source here, as I have not completed my study of it and lack the time and space to consider it here; I only mention it for those among my readers who may not have a Christian background and would like to turn to a different source such as this.

**Spe salvi facti sumus** – "In hope (or though hope) we were saved." With this quote from the letter of Saint Paul to the Romans (*Rom* 8:24) begins Benedict XVI's (2007) *Spe Salvi*, and thereby makes its message clear from the outset: hope is a strong force. So strong that we cannot live without it and depend on it for what Christians call "redemption" (salvation). If hope is such a vital force, we need to ask and want to know, What is its source? Or, asked in the theologically focused and accurate way in which Benedict XVI formulates the question: "What sort of hope could ever justify the statement that, on the basis of that hope and simply because it exists, we are redeemed?" (2007, p. 3).

**Hope based in faith** Theologically speaking, the basis of hope is faith. Whether we think of the Christian's belief in the teachings of Jesus or of the Buddhist's belief in the teachings of Buddha or of the beliefs of any other of the great religions, faith is key, so much so that hope and faith are inextricably linked. But despite the obvious importance of religious faith, I would not want to reduce "faith" to a merely religious and spiritual kind of force. We encounter and need faith in different ways in all areas of life; I am thinking, for example, of our relations with family members and friends, professional colleagues, political and legal institutions, and of course we also depend on faith in our own endeavors, whenever we are not just passive but engage in some activities and projects with which we associate some hopes.

What is the precise force that moves us in these different expressions of faith in daily life as much as in our religious and spiritual life? The most general answer of which I can think, inspired by *Spe Salvi* as I am, is this: it consists in the notion of a *future* for which it is worthwhile to strive and to struggle. Without the prospect of a future, without a vision, we have little reason to invest in the present, to *do* something about it. But *with* a future, we not only have reasons to make an effort, we also gain orientation, ideas, strength, in one word: hope.

But then, what exactly is it in faith that provides us with a future? In *Spe Salvi* we learn interesting things about the meaning of the biblical concept of "faith." We are referred to an unusual and thought-provoking definition of faith in Paul's letter to the Hebrews:

Faith is the *hypostasis* of things hoped for; the proof of things not seen. (*Heb* 11:1; Benedict XVI, 2007, p. 16)

That is, faith gives presence to that which the future holds but which we cannot see because it is not yet real. The traditional but inaccurate translation of *hypostasis* in this biblical quote is "substance," but a better word might be "certainty": through faith, that which we hope for becomes a certain source of orientation. We "know" what we want to achieve, we gain orientation. It is a reality that we carry within us, but as such it has a real power to move us:

It gives us even now something of the reality we are waiting for, and this present reality constitutes for us a "proof" of the things that are still unseen. Faith draws the future into the present, so that it is no longer simply a "not yet." (Benedict XVI, 2007, p. 19)

**Hope based in a vision of the future** *Spe Salvi* explains this intimate link between faith and future, hope and facing the present, in beautiful words inspired by Paul's letters to the Ephesians and to Thessalonians.

Paul reminds the Ephesians that before their encounter with Christ they were "without hope and without God in the world" (*Eph* 2:12)... In the same vein he says to the Thessalonians: you must not "grieve as others do who have no hope" (*1 Th* 4:13). Here too we see as a distinguishing mark of Christians the fact that they have a future: it is not that they know the details of what awaits them, but they know in general terms that their life will not end in emptiness. Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present as well.... In our language we would say: the Christian message was not only "informative" but "performative." (Benedict XVI, 2007, p. 4f)

I do not find it difficult to relate these insights to the current wave of hope and optimism that so many people associate with the new U.S. American President. What matters is not just that President Obama has promised real change but that he has done so in a way that has *already* changed so many people. *With hope we live the present differently*, for "we have a future." *Faith*, in the terms of contemporary language analysis and discourse theory, is the "performative" force that links the future we hope for with the present we live in. When we see a future, we not only are able to *live* the present but it also makes sense to *face* the present (2007, p.3), so as to work towards that future. Note that the prospect of change, whether in the form of religious redemption or of everyday progress of our human affairs, is never just given to us (cf. 2007, p. 3); rather, we must *earn* it by facing the present. It is not good enough to have hope and lean back; to look to "Washington" (or to "the

government," "those in charge," etc.) and wait for change to happen. As Arun Gandhi quotes his grandfather Mahatma Gandhi: "Be the change you wish to see." (O'Hahn, 2001, p. 6) This is what it means to "face the present."

But where can we find the strength and orientation to face the present – to always again engage anew in the daily quest for change and improvement – if not in some vision of the future that appeals to us and in which we have faith? To some, a religious Messiah provides the vision; to others, a political Messiah; to still others, perhaps a philosophical Messiah can provide orientation, say, towards personal virtue (e.g., Aristotle) or towards a global moral community (e.g., the Kantian vision of world peace and world citizenship). What matters is that we turn this source into a force that makes us "change ourselves" and "face the present."

**Hope based in practical philosophy** Facing the present is also a core concern of practical philosophy as I propose to understand it in its widest sense: namely, as *a force that "draws the future into the present"* and thereby gives us vital distance from the present. Thus understood, the quest for practical reason (the core business of practical philosophy) creates space for religious, spiritual, political as well as ethical thinking. I do not find it difficult, then, to relate *Spe Salvi* to my philosophical interest in practical reason, no more than to current political hopes. Practical reason differs from theoretical reason in that it need not "observe" (in the double sense of the word: recognize and obey) the laws of nature but is free to define its own principles of what is right and rational (Kant, 1787, 1788). Accordingly, practical philosophy is concerned with those inner sources of orientation and valuation that move us toward change, and which in the quest for change allow us to distinguish between change for the better and change for the worse.

To be sure, philosophy is often taken to be a complicated and abstract endeavor that is remote from everyday practice. But isn't it really up to us whether this is how we want to understand philosophy, or whether we do not prefer to understand and practice it in a way that helps us face the present? It seems to me that too often when we face genuinely philosophical issues such as they always come up with practical problems, issues such as what is

"good" and what is "rational," we tend to behave a bit like doctoral students who are just beginning to define the topic of their research: we tend to worry too much about definitions, procedures, and methods and not enough about the essence and ends of our effort; that is, about what kind of difference our research or practical engagement is to make in the end, not with regard to definitions, procedures, and methods but to the art of living here and now and wherever our influence may reach in future.

*Spe Salvi* reminds us that faith not only provides a basis for trustworthy hope but that it also frees us from seeing ourselves as being entirely conditioned by external forces; as being the eternal slaves of the circumstances, of the material conditions of our existence, and quite generally of that which we cannot change in the present. With hope, "the inexorable power of material elements no longer has the last word; we are not slaves of the universe and of its laws, we are free." (Benedict XVII, 2007, p. 13) From the standpoint of practical philosophy, being free means to be able to use our *reason*; to act *authentically* according to our genuine convictions; to work towards change in open and tolerant *exchange* with others.

Hope is such a strong and necessary ingredient of the quest for improvement precisely because it offers us these two kinds of strength at once: a firm basis in the form of faith or trust, and the personal freedom to orient us toward a "future drawn into the present." Interestingly, as I learn from *Spe Salvi* (2007, p. 13f), already the sarcophagi of the early Christian era captured this twofold source of strength: they show Christ both as a shepherd and as a philosopher. What a beautiful image: Christ, the ultimate source of hope, faith, and change, as *shepherd and philosopher* at once. A good shepherd knows a path on which the sheep will be safe and sound; a good philosopher knows a path of reflection through which autonomous and reasonable beings will be led to reason and act well:

Philosophy at that time was not generally seen as a difficult academic discipline, as it is today. Rather, the philosopher was someone who knew how to teach the essential art: *the art of being authentically human* – the art of living and dying. (2007, p. 14, my italics)

**Philosophy or the art of being authentically human** What a beautifully succinct and meaningful description of philosophy! Philosophy as a source

of hope that puts us in touch with the art of being authentically human – perhaps the most inspiring definition of philosophy that I have encountered. Such an understanding of philosophy is indeed very close to my belief that practical philosophy, adequately simplified and pragmatized, should in future play a more important part than we give it today in our conceptions of rational practice, in the public as well as in the private sector, in our professional as well as our private lives. I realize that probably not everyone will want to go as far as Kant (1788, A215ff) went with his concept of the *primacy of practical reason* over theoretical reason, which suggests that when it comes to the art of being authentically human, practical reason is primary and theoretical reason is only its servant. Although I tend to agree with Kant, I think it is quite good enough to recognize that when it comes to reflective practice, theoretical and practical reason are inseparable siblings. In other words, good practice is inextricably two-dimensional, in that it needs a basis in both knowledge and faith, present and future.

**Outlook** The circle is closing, then. Hope grounded in faith – "the *hypostasis* of things hoped for" – is not in opposition to acting *with reason* so as to bring about the kind of future we hope for. Reason needs orientation as much as faith needs reason for bringing about change.

Reason therefore needs faith if it is to be completely itself: reason and faith need one another in order to fulfil their true nature and their mission. (2007, p. 47).

Some readers may be surprised to find me emphasizing the role of hope and faith in conjunction with reason, given that I do not usually appeal to such acts of faith in my writings on practical reason and reflective professional practice. However, the reason for such abstinence is not that I consider hope and faith unimportant, only that calling for them does not constitute a *methodological* achievement. Methodological argumentation must show how we can *systematically* handle the normative content of all practice *with reason*, in ways that are transparent and open to questioning on the part of all those concerned, so that in the end we can claim that practical reason is more than just calculated partiality; that it amounts to a gain in rationality in the larger sense of considering the values and hopes of all those concerned. Methodological argumentation cannot tell us what these values and hopes

should be, much less distinguish a few selected visions of the future and sources of faith as the only right ones. Practical philosophy is not to supersede practice but must leave such judgments to practice itself.

It is not directed against recognizing the importance of faith, then, if methodological argumentation in practical philosophy concentrates on the task of explaining the idea and implications of *the moral point of view* (Baier, 1958). The moral point of view is an attitude of unconditional respect for the dignity and integrity of other people, which expresses itself in respecting their autonomy with respect to their choice of values and hopes, rather than in stipulating what these values and hopes ought to be – with the exception of that minimal normative core which is present in all reasonable practice in the form of the moral point of view itself. In this double sense of presupposing a minimal normative core and of depending on normative practice, the quest for practical reason requires both reason and faith. *Spe salvi facti erimus* – in hope we will be safe and sound.

Have a peaceful holiday season full of hopes, and stay safe and sound.

*Werner Ulrich*

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**Picture data** Digital photograph taken on 2 September 2007 around 2:30 p.m. near Koniz (Bern), Switzerland. Exposure time 1/1250 seconds, aperture f/8.0, ISO 50, focal length 7.8 mm (equivalent to 38 mm with a conventional 35 mm camera). Original resolution 2272 x 1704 pixels; current resolution 700 x 525 pixels, compressed to 100 KB.

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## November-December, 2008



*Days of hope, or: cloudspotter's Christmas*

„Faith draws the future into the present,  
so that it is no longer simply a 'not yet'.”

From *Spe Salvi*, Encyclical Letter of Benedict XVI (2007, p. 19)

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