

# Relational ethics in a changing world. Should this lead to a change of contextual therapy?

Keynote on day 3 of the ICCT 2018

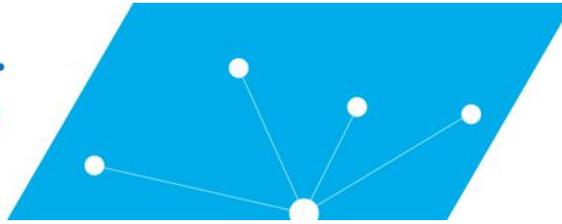
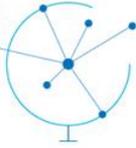
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## Summary

*'While our recent ancestors still believed in the future as the safest and most promising location for investing their hopes, we tend to project into it primarily our manifold fears, anxieties and apprehensions [...]'. This quote of Zygmunt Bauman is a strong summary of some consequences of the fast changing world for ordinary people. What does the 'liquidity' in contemporary society mean for relational ethics? The growing scarcity of jobs, of falling incomes reducing our and our children's life chances, the yet greater frailty of our social positions and the temporality of our life achievements, the momentousness of the challenges facing us, all these perceptions and fears demand for the saving or resourcing of trust in close relationships. As human beings we cannot help but hope for the long-term well-being of the human race. As therapists we have a mandate to support our clients to restore their trust and capacity of fairness regarding the long-term consequences of responsible caring. The work of Boszormenyi-Nagy as a future-orientated perspective gives important notions for rethinking good therapy and prevention.*

After such inspiring workshops and other meetings ... Who can answer this question? When I received the invitation for this lecture, I wrote: No one can foresee the answers of the future generations but we can try to anticipate on their questions to us ...I am one of the oldest here, so the future is more yours than mine... nobody can foresee the future and me even less than younger colleagues. Therefore I would like to ask you, maybe it seems in-modest, but nevertheless: are there participants here younger than 30 years? Or...? I really do not want to put pressure on any of you, but when you, or some of you, would make (after my lecture) some comments, or your own thoughts on this subject, I would most appreciate this...



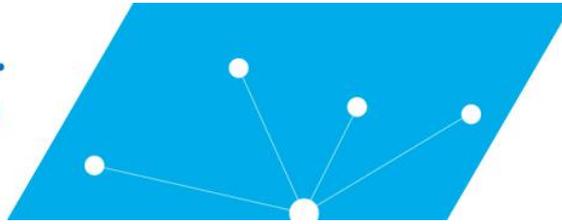
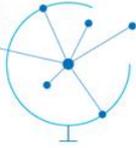
Now from my side: Of course good therapy has to be in motion, meaning: supporting clients in their growing towards caring, for less making other human beings into objects, for more inclusion of others, contributing to a (more) just human order. But how to work on this and at the same time remain realistic and without nostalgia?

Illusions do not help. I have to search for hope without illusions. We live in a world where there are many developments that are making human beings less subjects of their own life. There is a big tendency towards increasing objectification of human beings. So social and relational ethics are under pressure, maybe more than ever. I am stressing this at the very beginning now, because I sometimes had the experience that contextual counsellors/ therapists, myself included, had maybe even more than their peers, a longing for the past as a lost paradise. For times when there were extended families living near each other, villages to raise the children. But by nostalgia we don't help ourselves nor our clients.

Personally, about the attraction of a dreamed past and a safe today



My childhood was spent not far from here. Me and my family lived near the Dutch Open Air museum, and our visits there to the cosy little farmhouses were a joy for me, although I pitied the poorness of so much people in the past. This is not only a museum but also a centre for historical research and for me that was fascinating too. It was looking into Dutch culture esp. family-culture throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. I know since long that I was idealizing this, a rather romantic past, seen from the here-and-now that for me was safe then... And I trusted: the future will be – no, not exactly the same, but it would be all things a bit better: welfare for more people, peacefully living together... And also: no big changes, no large ruptures or discontinuity. I remember my father, he himself a historical researcher, speaking about his conviction that 'man visiting the moon' would not be possible and was really not desirable. And speaking from his humanistic view on the human world



as becoming more and more a union of benign openhearted people. Wishful thinking of my parents who as many of their peers, suffered in WW II, and were trying to contribute to an better World, committed to fairness, to a responsible international legal system. A better version of the world before the war, but in essence an extension of the past.

Motivations for denying that the future is otherwise than an extension of today

For me its is more easy to see my parents naivety than my own. Nowadays not less than in the first years after WW II, there are many motivations for looking at the future of humankind as a self evident better version of the past or our own era. I mention 3 motivations and coping-strategies: First: an activist attitude (*as I described my parents had*): we know the past, more or less; we know what went wrong, what is missing, so let's work on this to make a better human world/ (*I will mention later, for criticizing this: Hans Jonas*)

Second: the conviction: that there really is much improvement of civilization. Maybe not on all domains of men in the world, but it 'is' (feels) better to concentrate on what went well / (*Here as a criticizer: Zygmunt Bauman*)

Thirdly: we embrace the option to stay in the driver's seat, to be in charge. In that way we do not feel our fears so much ...(*Yuval Harari puts an end to this illusion*)

These motivations, although with very good intentions, are not realistic orientations.

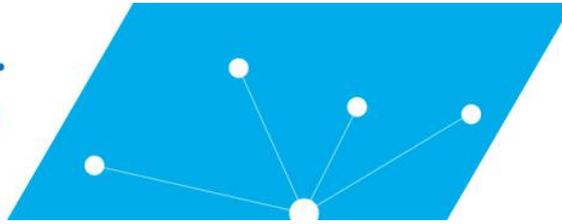
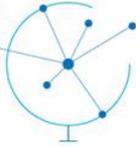
Preparing this lecture I read in the newspapers about the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, last January. This year's theme: *Creating a Shared Future in a Fractured World*. A meeting of the most powerful persons in the world speaking together about the enormous gaps between rich and poor, black and white people, between men and women.

On day One of Davos, the India Prime Minister Modi listed his three most significant challenges to civilization: climate change (or: the ecological crisis), terrorism and the backlash against globalization. Modi, leader of the fastest growing major economy in the world, also spoke about the opportunities and dangers of technology, India's plan to fight income inequality, job creation, [ etcetera ...]

Addressing the pushback against globalization in many parts of the world, Modi said: "Many societies and countries are becoming more and more focused on themselves. It feels like the opposite of globalization is happening. The negative impact of this kind of mind-set and wrong priorities cannot be considered less dangerous than climate change or terrorism. Everyone is talking about an interconnected world, but we will have to accept the fact that globalization is slowing, losing its lustre." End of quote.

Let us realize that the world is not growing to be one extended 'shining' village, but it is fast becoming fractured to be many mega-cities, where so many persons including children are even without water- and food-security.

When I am honest, I know that extrapolating a dreamed past to times-to-come, is not a realist attitude but an avoiding stance. It means illusions. Like claiming trust without any evidence of trustworthiness, or better said, with all the evidence of the opposite. Then posterity is the most affected.



Insofar my words may seem rather pessimistic. Isn't there anything we can learn from the past? Searching for responsibility concerning the future, my hope is that we can be helped a bit by the writings of some scholars who studied main transitions in the history of mankind. 3 names: Hans Jonas, Zygmunt Bauman, Yuval Harari, who criticized the attitudes or coping strategies as mentioned, in so far these were too naïve. In their views relational ethics are not isolated from social ethics.

Hans Jonas:



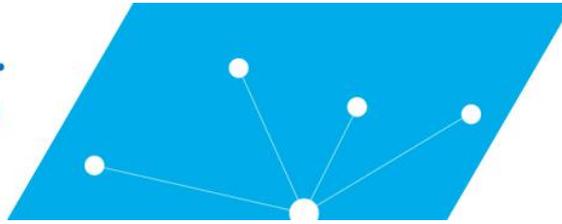
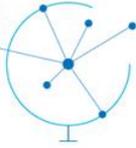
Hans Jonas (1903-1993) criticized the activist attitude especially because of the unjust trust in technology and industrialization for making a better human world. He once wrote: 'optimism is irresponsible'. I mention his name here also because IBN mentioned his work, as congenial. With reference to Hans Jonas, IBN wrote (already in 1986): *'In order to survive, humanity needs a new, appropriately effective ethics of responsibility to twarth its likely destructive consequences to posterity'*. (F301) (To twarth: to tone down, to weaken)

Jonas formulated an 'Imperative of Responsibility':

"Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life" (Jonas 1984, 11). We must track down the danger before it's too late. If not, the potential disappearance of the human species will become a real and irreversible destruction.

Jonas' idea of responsibility –and this is of special interest for us as – implies (what he called:) a non-reciprocity, a basic asymmetry, because it is brought to bear on *that which is not yet* (concerning duty to children newborn and yet to be born). 'Here (in this asymmetry) is the prototype of all responsible action, which fortunately requires no deduction from a principle, because it is powerfully implanted in us by nature' (id., 39). [Congenial with words of IBN: *'The impact of the present on yet unborn generations is largely unilateral, nonfeedback-like.'*]

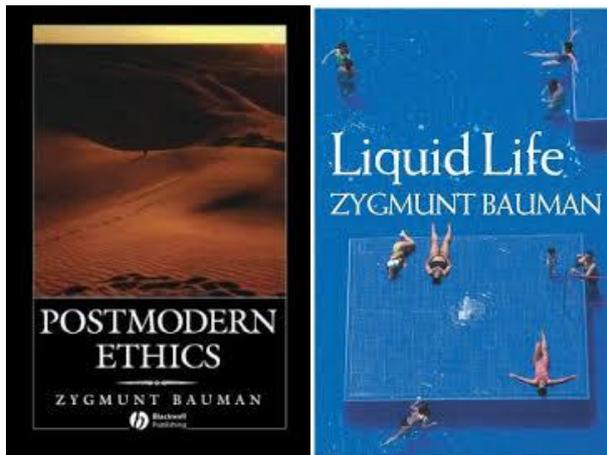
According to Jonas this means to accept limitations in economically and technically growing. Jonas' responsibility includes an intergenerational sacrifice, from people now for future generations. So that humanity can be maintained (That there will be a mankind).



So the earth has to be respected instead of exploited, when we want to save the human species and humanity.

*“The future is unilaterally, thus captively exposed to the consequences of the present reality.” (Nagy & Krasner, 1986:130)*

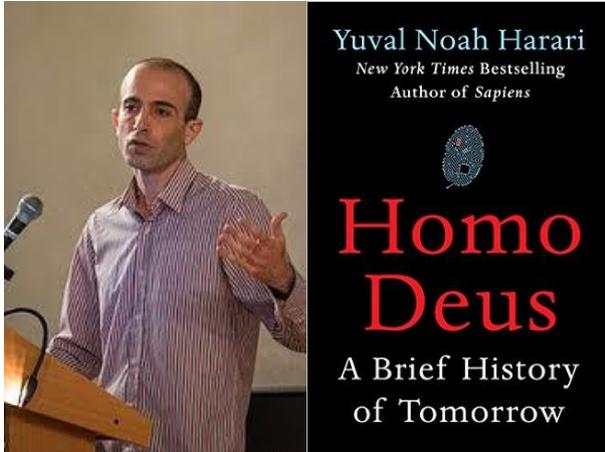
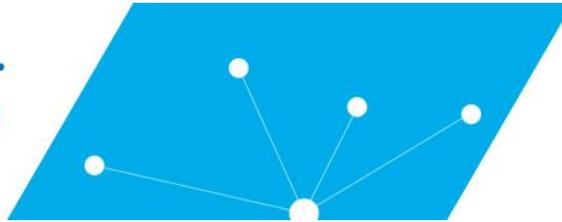
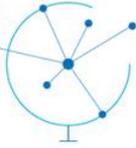
Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017):



In his work as a sociologist and philosopher he puts an end to the conviction of ‘always better civilization’. Bauman in his research on the Holocaust emphasized that *genocidal social engineering* proved to be compatible with modern civilization, a horrible fact when it was so much more comfortable to see the genocide on the Jews and Romanies as ‘only’ an ‘accident’ in the history of humankind.

Bauman, who died last year, wrote also about today. He writes of a transition from ‘solid modernity’ to a more ‘liquid’ form of social life. The consequences of this move can most easily be seen in contemporary approaches to self-identity. In liquid modernity, constructing a durable identity that coheres over time and space becomes increasingly difficult. We have moved from a period where we understood ourselves as “pilgrims” in search of deeper meaning to one where we act as “tourists” in search of multiple but fleeting social experiences.. He warned against the consequences of this lack of valuing continuity; namely: relational detachment. A romance with the past (‘Retropia’) is an irresponsible dream. For Bauman it is not too late, when we are aware of the risks.

And now to: Yuval Noah Harari (Israël 1976), well known for his books *Sapiens* and more recently *Homo deus*.

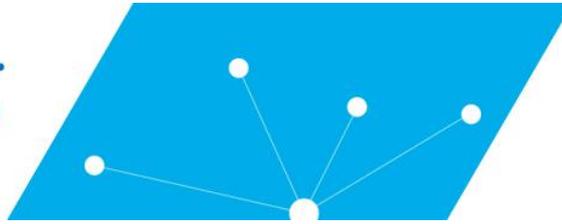
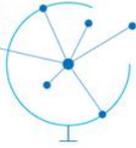


We are not in the driver's seat. 'Things are moving so fast (according to Harari) that it's impossible to imagine what the future might hold. In 1800 it was possible to think meaningfully about what the world of 1900 would be like and how we might fit in. That's history: a sequence of events in which human beings play the leading part. But the world of in about a century is at present almost unimaginable. We have no idea where we'll fit in, if at all.' 'Humans are going to become cyborgs (cybernetic organisms, robots with organic and inorganic parts)'. It seems that very soon computers, with very intelligent algorithms but without feelings and longings, will have more data about us than we ourselves.

Harari, for me, is not a prophet but gives a possible scenario of the future. Have we built a world that soon will have no place for us, human beings? Or only for special designed supermen, with genes very specified thanks to very intelligent algorithms? Given what an alarming thought this is, why can't we do more to stop it from happening? Harari thinks the modern belief that individuals are in charge of their fate was never much more than a leap of faith. Real power always resided not with individuals but with networks. Individual human beings are relatively powerless creatures, 'no match for lions or bears'. 'It's what they can do as groups that, in history until now, has enabled human beings to take over the planet. These groupings – corporations, religions, states – are now part of a vast network of interconnected information flows. Finding points of resistance, where smaller units can stand up to the waves of information washing around the globe, is becoming harder all the time.' Standing up to the waves of information or pseudo-information washing around the globe, as human beings with intelligence and with feelings and longings... in 'smaller units' – this means also: networks of families and of colleagues and neighbours and others- how can they, how can we support a resistance against the data of the 'new religion' of growth and the entities in charge.

#### For a better resistance

Hans Jonas, Zygmunt Bauman, Yuval Harari, as I mentioned, each of them sees the current situation of humankind as in crisis, the risk that human beings are made into objects, detached from each other... The analyses of these thinkers are intended as looking for all this as a chance ...They are averse to romance with the past and illusions about the future, but this does not mean that for them the future is totally determined or a fate. They agree that the future is one of the most vulnerable



targets of (relational) consequences. When we tend to perceive the reality of men as an autonomous process ('anything goes') or as neutral systems, or even think about ourselves as *only elements in anonymous systems*, then there would be not much hope for the future of humankind. Then the risk of a self-fulfilling prophecy of objectification of human beings is at large.

Do people perceive themselves or their neighbours or loved ones, as only elements in a larger system? I do not believe this. Not in living practice.

So let me make the issues more concrete. There is always hope in concreteness. Therefore: About Kathy.

Kathy was a young woman, she had all the reasons in the world to ask bitter questions to her ancestors, but she didn't. She never met them. As child and teenager she lived together with peers in a kind of boarding school in the UK. She had there 2 good friends: Tommy and Ruth. Kathy and her school friends are *clones* who were created to provide organs for others, a cycle of donations that will end their lives when they are still young. Loyalty here does not mean connectedness via blood ties, although these youngsters are rather eager to see the woman or man from whom they are cloned. Their committed loyal care goes to each other, passing the normal feelings of jealousy and rivalry. Clones- Kathy and her friends are youngsters who function as opportunities for other more privileged people and their physical needs.

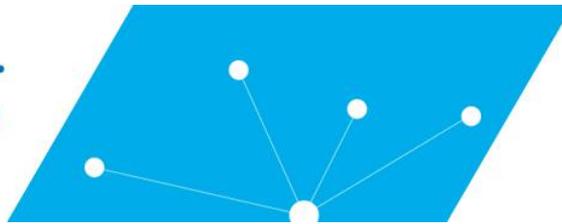


*Kathy, Tommy and Ruth, in the filmadaptation  
(Kazuo Ishiguro, 2005, Never let me go)*

Let us hope this story (of K. Ishiguro) will be a self-denying prophecy. Clones of men are in fact human beings.

The case of Kathy is fictional, as yet. [A rather cynical side-remark: Kathy and her companions are not so much driven or split by the high expectations of the previous generation as most of their non-fictional contemporaries as Millennials are, often overburdened with subtle mandates and legacies. The expectations to which Kathy has to reciprocate (respond), in other words; her offerings, are clearly defined without the parental expectation of her consent. Her consent does not have importance.]

Surely we cannot foresee the attitudes of future generations concerning relational ethical issues, but we can, more or less, anticipate their questions to us; questions, not a claim; they do not have any possibility to force us into consideration with them, they only make a appeal to those people who



dot not numb their ears ...Maybe the most important question we can anticipate, is: did you hear me, instead of standing away? I quote Michail Bakhtin: 'For the word - and consequently for the human being- there is nothing more terrible than a lack of response'. And IBN himself quoted philosopher Heinemann: *Respondeo ergo sum*, I answer therefore I am. (F p95)

I think, for contextual workers, this is our most basic anthropology for now and the future. And a basic criterion for relational ethics.

Relational ethics in a changing world. Should this lead to a change of contextual therapy?

We cannot know the future. When we do not-know in terms of knowledge, what can we hear or presume in terms of accountability and responsibility? Nagy himself in a conversation about these issues once used the German word *Haftbarkeit*. In English: is it possible to be a guarantor, a guarantee... giving trust in the hope that the new ones will trust this (i.c. my trust in them, my care)... and will give this further on, without certitude that the people-to-come will not abuse this gift...

The people-to-come give me a possibility for practising solidarity. They are asking us, without words, for being responsible caring persons. Persons who know about the basic interdependency of man, through space and time. People who will live to see that trust is contagious, trust often generates trust. We have other options, as human beings, civilians and also as therapists, but when we neglect the calling of the generations-to-be, then there is no human future qualified by humanness. And maybe even not any humankind. We cannot give up about the existence of our species, of human beings!

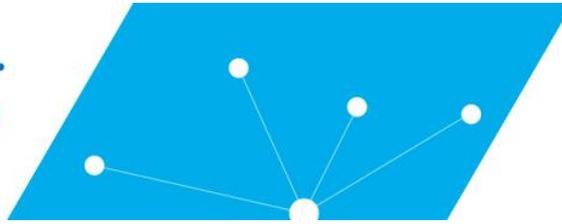
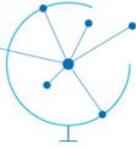
IBN used the term transgenerational solidarity, not a theoretical concept as such, but with in his mind the concrete ethical entanglements between generations. Not idealistic, but ethics without illusions. He stated the one-side impact of the consequences of the living persons now on later generations, more feed forward than feedback. I quote from the introduction in *Foundations of CT*: 'A disregard for consequences to children in adult living arrangements is just as detrimental to posterity's relational reality as colonial or dogmatic conquest of one society by another has been on a larger scale.'

Transgenerational solidarity requires both:

- priority of the consideration of welfare of posterity, and
- multilateral fairness in the relations of contemporaries.' (cf *Foundations* 309)

So when we try to consider the welfare of posterity, we need to consider this multilateral fairness here and now, and also between groups who are not per se connected by loyalties but by this hearing of the calling, this appeal to 'respondeo'. So: Relational ethics implying social ethics.

More and more do we know how people are objectified when we conceive them as determined by one identity, once and for all defined. In gender-aspects, ethnicity, sexuality, social class etcetera. What does this mean for relational ethics? To be open for what is unpredictable, because we change in the encounter, even in our so called identities, by meeting an other, by responding to another. Relational ethics means to be responsible not only at present but lasting, enduring through the shifts



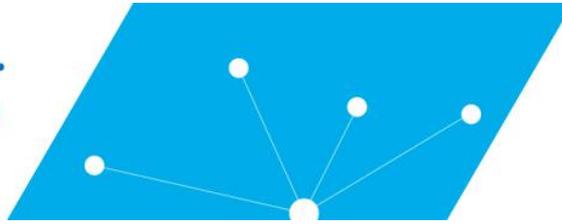
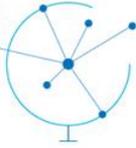
and transformations in persons and between persons. Transgenerational solidarity cannot be isolated from transgroup solidarity.

Should contextual therapy change? I do not have much recommendations. I tried to point out something which deserves our consideration. I will conclude with 3 notions which in my view sometimes need more attention in therapy or among therapists.

1. the reciprocity in contextual theory is a very special reciprocity. IBN, CDN and others have emphasized the aspect of generosity of giving (or: indirect return) as meaningful in the concepts of good therapy. Are we willing to give up some of our well-being, on behalf of the future? Not based on altruism, nor is this per se overburdening. We have to help our clients to see this very special reciprocity in their own life. What they already have received, sometimes by being given the possibility to give. This is not moralizing but realistic help and relational education. It would be sad when the current generations would perceive themselves as neglected and misunderstood by offspring that is accusing their parents for egotism and when as a result the current generations would become very lonesome or overburdened, not by overstressed responsibility but by guilt and resentment and disappointment. *"... when unrealistic expectations are disappointed, as they inevitably will be, relationships are burdened with attended feelings of resentment and guilt. Yet few things are as commonplace as parents who delegate unrealistic and unfulfillable expectations to their children who, perforce, are made to bear the onus of invisible loyalties."* (Nagy & Krasner, 1986,130).

2. Dialogue. As therapists, we have a mandate to support our clients in their efforts to meet other people and the world in genuine dialogue, and to save and resource their sense of the long-term consequences of responsible caring in close relationships. This includes also a specific task to be in dialogue about 'what is good therapy?' It is evident: As contextual therapists or counsellors with a relational-ethical vocabulary, we do not have the exclusive right to good therapy. We can share with other schools our basic assumptions. Can we develop/ co-construct a culture in which can be freely spoken about the conditions of good therapy... what makes therapy work? Openness for dialogue with and in the future, as a very special reciprocity requires cooperation of older and younger colleague of different schools, as responsibility without rivalry. Let me quote IBN again: 'the sole undeniable core of an integration of therapeutic modalities has to be founded on the essence of therapy as a whole – the ethics of caring'. (F p319)

3. Connectedness/ interconnectedness. 'Time has come that we have to look for ways of interconnectedness which are unimaginable just now', wrote recently poetress Antjie Krog. I tend to agree with her. Humaneness is influenced by our connectedness to the earth and all its inhabitants, a web of relations and interconnectedness that even extends to nonliving things. So, let us as therapists/ counsellors focus on the resources of our clients and ourselves in a broad sense of meaning! Healing through meeting, is not the exclusive domain of one human being with another, but can be with woman or man, in meeting a nonhuman living thing in nature, or even a spiritual being, as Buber developed in *I and Thou*. Let us be receptive to the care a client gives to her/ his



environment, sometimes by making some sacrifices. .... It is high time. And in my view this can be fitting with the work on ontic dependence as done by IBN and CDN.

*"If individuals or groups will be able to connect profit for themselves with taking into account the interest of others and experience this as a self-reinforcing motivation force it will gradually seep into general consciousness. Here in lies our only hope."* (IBN in: van Heusden & van den Eerenbeemt, Balance in motion)

I would like to end with words I borrow from Margaret Cotroneo (2007) about IBN:

'His body of work on relational ethics stands as a beacon for those who understand the essence of therapy as healing that strives to maintain the integrity of one's relational world.'

And I like to add: ... for now and time-to-come: human world without end.

The future is in every second –Loesje, a poster project for outdoor public spaces started 30 years ago by a girl in Holland and is now to see world wide in many languages a collective of people who want to make the world a more positive creative place.

Thank you for your attention and your patience.

*I would like to ask now for any thoughts of our younger colleagues...The future is more with you, I hope, than with me...*

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