



The Emotional Boundaries of Our Solidarity

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Much thought is being given nowadays to the ways in which society might continue to substantiate the principle of solidarity in the economic sphere. Predictable cost increases in the social security system stand at the root of a number of problems that have arisen. While those concerned look for solutions, a discussion is emerging concerning the communal scope of solidarity. People are not only asking themselves *how* they are to remain in solidarity, but also *with whom* they should share the means at their disposal. The concomitant question '*with whom?*' is not always as evident as it might seem, since the ethical scope of solidarity appears, in principle at least, to be unlimited.¹ *De facto*, however, the limits of solidarity tend to coincide with those of the political community. The ongoing unification of Europe should broaden matters in this regard, but whether this process will also broaden our perspective on world-wide solidarity remains to be seen. At the same time, certain groups are calling for a stricter delimitation of our solidarity. The elections in Europe during the past ten years have made it clear that a number of emotional factors play a role in this context, factors which are not infrequently expressed in the slogan 'our own first'.

The intention of this article is to confront, with the Christian principle of solidarity, certain spontaneous and emotional motivating forces which call for a limitation of our solidarity. Solidarity implies both a feeling and a rational decision. In line with any other emotion, the feeling of solidarity is rooted in motivating factors of which we are not always consciously aware. Such factors are rarely thematised in an explicit fashion, partly because they are as such difficult to discuss and partly because they are difficult to make operational at the 'scientific' level. As a

rule, our attention tends to be focused on the ethical desirability and practical-economical achievability of solidarity. As a starting point, I would like to broaden our vision of the emotional and subconscious motivating factors of solidarity. As a means to this end I will call upon a number of theories concerning the processes of social influence which go beyond the individual's capacity to decide in the context of realising concrete initiatives. Having done this our second step will be to relate the problem of the emotional limitation of solidarity to the Christian concept of solidarity.

Solidarity Based on Conformity and Solidarity Based on Division of Labour

History seems to repeat itself. The tendencies which were so characteristic for France at the end of the 19th century: racism, nationalism and threatened democracy, re-emerged in the 1930's and remain a part of our contemporary mentality. In the French context, the move to the right took personal shape in the form of the nationalist General G. Boulanger (1837-1891), while racism raised its head in the form of intense anti-semitism (the Dreyfus Affair, 1887-1889). Shortly prior to this, the uprising of the 'Communards' in Paris (1871) was violently suppressed. Given the political events of their time, it is probable that figures such as Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), together with many of his contemporaries, were afraid that society was about to disintegrate. In any event, Durkheim's first major study (*De la division du travail social*,² 1893) dealt with the problem of solidarity. According to Durkheim, we can distinguish two distinct forms of solidarity: one based on conformity and the other based on the division of labour.³



1. Originally, every community was characterised by solidarity based on conformity. This form of solidarity emerged when individuals thought and acted in a mutually similar way, thus giving rise to a sacred 'group sentiment' which contributed in turn to the integrity of social life. In a conformist society, the uniformity of thought and deed was orchestrated by 'collective consciousness'. One might conceive of such a concept, which for Durkheim was of fundamental significance, as the mentality which exercises an irresistible influence on the way individuals in a society think and act. 'Collective consciousness' is that which 'one' (*das Man*) thinks, does and says and it leads its own life. It does not exist, it is true, without individuals, but it is also not strictly dependent upon them. Generations may come and go, but the 'collective consciousness' continues to exist. Its authority was once so great that individual consciousness was entirely eclipsed by it. Its supremacy only began to decline at the moment when the isolation of the various communities was interrupted by the increasing density of social life, the emergence of the cities and the increase in communication between individual societies.

A community whose integration was guaranteed by solidarity based on conformity was characterised by a legal system which was geared towards the sanctioning of any violation of uniformity with a punishment which raised just as much emotion as that unleashed by the violation itself. The punishment that such a legal system applied was 'painful' because it constituted the way in which the 'collective consciousness' took 'revenge' on those persons who had threatened the community's conformity by their transgression. The guilty individual had to do penance at the physical level as well as in his or her personal respect and family life.

2. While each family initially took care of its own needs, pressure of circumstances gave rise to certain professions which focused their concern

on specific areas of need. Within modern society, a process of exchange of goods and services began to emerge. In contrast to the notion of solidarity based on conformity, solidarity based on the division of labour is rooted in difference rather than uniformity. Indeed, specialisation depends on the possession of specific skills and competencies. Thus, the emergence of individualism coincided with the development of a new form of social life.

The purpose of the legal system in societies in which solidarity was based on the division of labour was not 'atonement' for damage done but 'reparation'. There was less talk of shame and disgrace; emotional upset at both transgression and its punishment was far from what it once had been. The breach of a co-operative contract was not so much a humiliation of the individual with respect to the 'social consciousness', but rather a conflict between individuals. Breach of contract did not require physical punishment nor need it affect the honour and family life of the individual involved. Reparation for the damage done came first and foremost.

The morality of modern-day forms of social existence demands that the individual take up his or her personal responsibility with greater awareness. In traditional communities, the ethical rules were encompassed by an authority which was derived from the inclusive collective consciousness. One did what was prescribed as ethical because one was blindly obedient to what was expected of 'one' (*das Man*). The morality of the new forms of social existence began to lean more towards rational argumentation than towards group sentiment, and as a consequence, new approaches to ethics began to presuppose an increasing insistence on the development of the individual personality.

In spite of its historical inaccuracies, Durkheim's study offers a conceptual model with which we can track the emotional and rational aspects of solidarity. The rational dimension is an extension



of the notion of solidarity based on the division of labour. Such solidarity is not sustained by an emotional group sentiment, but is instead the result of considered co-operation, and thus is the product of an individual's capacity to distance herself from immediate impulses. In contrast, solidarity based on conformity is spontaneous solidarity, one which emerges when the group comes before the individual and when personal reflection remains undesirable.

Durkheim's hypothesis offers, among other things, an explanation of the two following observations. The emotional indignation which emerges as a result of a violation of the principle of solidarity is not always related to the actual social and economic consequences of the violation in question. For instance, violations take place which have dreadful consequences on the economic level without creating scandal. At the same time, there are also violations which have a limited economic effect yet still provide a source of great emotional upheaval. While petty theft from a shop might be considered humiliating, little if any indignation is caused by it with respect to tax evasion and flight of capital. In line with Durkheim's position, such a situation can be explained as follows: only those violations which affect the collective consciousness are likely to cause emotional upheaval, while less commotion is likely to be made with respect to abuses which belong to the realm of solidarity based on the division of labour, with all the consequences thereof.

A second observation is related to our tendency to restrict solidarity to the people with whom we are familiar. People tend to feel spontaneously in solidarity with those who 'agree' with them. The same individuals are less likely to feel spontaneous solidarity towards others who deviate from the group norm and who upset group conformity by their strange behaviour. With respect to such 'foreigners' one is not only likely to encounter indifference but also hate. Given the fact the non-conformity damages the integrity of the group, the individual-surpassing group senti-

ment will, according to Durkheim, turn against the 'foreigner'. The reason why conformity is comforting and non-conformity threatening is not given further treatment in Durkheim's theory. What is established, however, is that personal consciousness is made uneasy by strange ideas and propositions, and that community consciousness will tend, therefore, to turn against such strange ideas and ways of behaviour. Durkheim limits himself to this proposition and offers no further explanation thereof. Perhaps the interpretation of the concept of 'identification' might offer some clarification.

Solidarity and Identification

Durkheim's study concerning shifts in the forms of social integration did not come into existence in a vacuum. A number of prominent researchers, with whom he would later engage in a dialogue, published material on the same topic around the same time. Three years prior to Durkheim's study, Gabriël Tarde's *Les lois de l'imitation*⁴ appeared (1890), a work which dealt with the relationship between the individual and the community. Five years later Gustave le Bon's stirring *Psychologie des foules*⁵ (1895) was published; it was considered the most authoritative work on the psychology of the masses for fifty years after its publication.

Concerning individuals who form part of the masses, le Bon wrote that they tended to experience a feeling of invincible power, losing their sense of responsibility in the anonymous crowd. Such individuals are quickly influenced or 'infected' by the behaviour of the other individuals who constitute the masses, undergoing a sort of persuasion akin to hypnotic suggestion. The masses as such are impulsive, unstable, irritable, easily manipulated and gullible. The person who would wish to take advantage of the masses would do best not to employ reasonable arguments but propose, rather, fascinating visual images which they should repeat again and again.



The masses as such shelter no doubts. For this reason they are able to offer blind faith in a particular authority and maintain a position of unlimited intolerance. The only positive thing le Bon has to say is that the masses can raise the moral standards of the individual. "While the personal advantage of isolated individual is more or less his or her only motivation, this is seldom the case where the masses are concerned."⁶ The masses, however, do not increase the moral standards of the individual by appealing to his or her capacity to reason, but do so instead upon the basis of emotional influence.

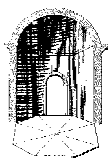
Le Bon's denegrating choice of words goes back to his initial aversion towards the socialist movements which he viewed, from his middle-class conservative standpoint, as the phenomena of a counterfeit culture. The pessimistic tone of his work also stems from the delimitation of his topic. Indeed, le Bon did not have an organised society in mind when he wrote, but rather the ephemeral masses.

Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* was the point of departure for Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*,⁷ published in 1921. Fascinated by le Bon's observations, Freud asked himself how it was possible that the intellectual capacity of the individual was so powerfully inhibited in a group situation. In an effort to offer an answer to this question he proposed the following hypothesis: the masses emerge when individuals equate their ideals with the will of a single leader or with a single abstract system of ideas and when they thereby come to identify with one another. Freud considered the 'ego ideal' to be a critical instance at that moment. If it became completely equated with the common ideal, then personal rationality would tend to vanish. The feeling of omnipotence experienced by the individual in a group context harkens back to the narcissistic origin of his or her emotional capacity which has crossed over to the ideal of the group.

Freud compared the masses with two similar

human traits: 'falling in love' and 'suggestion'. When an individual falls in love, he or she also loses his or her critical capacities and is affected by emotions beyond reasonable proportion. This takes place because the person with whom one falls in love is idealised from a narcissistic standpoint. Still, the person in question does not only represent the ideal, but also the object of love, given that in such an event not only restrained but also purposive sexual desires exist. The latter is not the case, however, with respect to hypnosis and the formation of the masses. As it is with the masses, the hypnotist becomes the exclusive substitute of the 'ego ideal'. Hypnosis, however, is an inter-individual matter while the formation of the masses involves a multitude of people.

The community which borrows its integrity from solidarity on the basis of conformity in Durkheim's theory and the ephemeral masses in Freud's hypothesis reveal several striking similarities. Both groups are characterised by powerful emotionality. In both groups, individuality and critical capacities are inhibited and the 'foreign' becomes an object of hate. Freud explains why this happens as follows. When conformity comes under threat, the individual is affected at a level which constitutes his or her personal identity, namely his or her 'ego ideal'. Given the fact that the 'ego ideal' is cherished with narcissistic wilfulness, the emotions let loose by the threat to the 'ego ideal' are akin to the impulse of self-preservation. In this regard, Freud wrote: "In the undisguised antipathies and aversions which people feel towards strangers with whom they have to do we may recognise the expression of self-love — of narcissism. This self-love works for the preservation of the individual, and behaves as though the occurrence of any divergence from his own particular lines of development involved a criticism of them and a demand for their alteration... it is unmistakable that in this whole connection men give evidence of a readiness for hatred, an aggressiveness, the source of which is unknown,



and to which one is tempted to ascribe an elementary character.”⁸

As we saw with le Bon, Freud also had the ephemeral masses in mind. He was well-aware that masses which completely absorbed the individual were rather rare phenomena. “Each individual is a component part of numerous groups, he is bound by ties of identification in many directions, and he has built up his ego ideal upon the most various models.”⁹ In the event that his or her group comes under threat, an individual will only feel personally affected to the extent that his or her personal identity coincides with that of the group in question. For this reason one can propose that the spontaneous emotional delimitation of solidarity will be proportional to the level of differentiation with which an individual’s personal identity has developed. In order to elucidate this proposition we will focus for a moment on the significance of identification in the development of personal identity.

Imaginary and Symbolic Models of Identification

The notion of ‘identification’ probably sounds quite familiar to the contemporary reader, being one of the many psychoanalytical concepts which have become part of our everyday language. In contrast to other fundamental concepts, however, ‘identification’ only gradually took root as a fundamental concept in Freud’s research. In *Traumdeutung* (1900), it was seen, on the one hand, as an unconscious mechanism of hysterical neurosis and, on the other, as a style-figure of dream activity. The notion of identification later emerged in relation to the object choice. It was not until Freud’s study of narcissism that the concept was treated as a fundamental developmental moment.

The concept of identification was further elaborated by Jacques Lacan (1901-1981). In his first texts he focused on the ‘imaginary’ identification processes through which a child forms an image of his or her own body. Initially one sees

one’s body as if it were made up of separate zones which are not integrated into a uniform ‘*Gestalt*’. When a child emulates the image of others, he or she comes to the awareness that his or her own body constitutes a unity. This new perspective allows us to observe that the unity of the body was not evident in the period prior to it. Fear remains that ‘disintegration’ will manifest itself anew. Where the process of unification runs awry, the foundation is thereby laid for the formation of psychotic syndromes. ‘Mortal anxiety’ with respect to the destruction of one’s own self-image makes the experience of the ‘imaginary’ identification process into an ambivalent event.

Where narcissistic identification is concerned, there is no clear distinction to be discerned between the self and others. A child will only develop an awareness of ‘the difference’ at a later point in his or her development, when the dual form of relationship is ruptured by the entrance of the third person. For Lacan, the moment in question coincides with the moment at which the child — up to that point completely in love with his or her mother — is forced to account for the rights of the father. Since the mother is not always present, the child is forced to assume that the mother has other desires beyond the desire to fulfil his or her desires. What the child is unable to give to the mother she is forced to seek from the father. The child comes to learn, however, that the father does not constitute the mother’s ‘lost object’, but that the father *has* something through which he can establish rights with respect to the mother. This fact is of a symbolic nature. The child then endeavours to establish rights with respect to the mother by adopting the characteristics of the father. From that moment on, the subject no longer consists of an image of its own body but of a series of identifying marks which possess a symbolic value within the subject’s cultural system of meaning. Identity, then, is a place within a field of meaning which implies that the child can no longer coincide with itself because it is something which it must continually



realise.

Lacan focused primarily on what happened to the subject when it evolved from imaginary to symbolic reality. Since what is represented by symbols is not present in a solid manner, language creates the dynamic of human desire which is oriented towards undoing our loss of immediate contact with the surrounding world and our loss of inalienable individuality. By entering into symbolic reality, however, the separation becomes definitive. Personal identity is irretrievably associated with a variety of factors which are determined in their turn by other factors. People, at the same time, tend to desire to put an end to this experience of contingency.

When this dimension of desire is factored in, it becomes understandable why imaginary identification models exist through which one can escape the experience of the contingency of personal identity. Such models bestow an excessive significance upon certain identity-conferring factors, thus making it possible to evade other aspects of personal life and our fellow human beings. Religious fanaticism and ultra-nationalism would seem to be among the most striking examples of such exaggerated factors. The wrongfulness of such theories is not to be found in their manifest content, but in that which allows them to enable people to disregard the 'other'. There is nothing wrong with being proud of one's country, but if this predilection is employed in order to avoid the shortcomings of our own personal history or to avoid having to account for the reasonable demands of our economic situation or to blame others for certain problems we are being forced to confront, then there is certainly something amiss.

Narcissistic, self-affirming systems do not belong to the original cultural tradition. They are instead the product of an unacceptable simplification. Within every traditional culture and within every religious meaning-system nuanced opinions are available with respect to tolerance and universal solidarity. Cultural and religious systems only

become narcissistic, self-affirming systems when those involved endeavour to ignore original cultural complexity, motivated by an imaginary expectation that by so doing they will be able to escape all kinds of contingency.

Lacan departs from the idea that no one can speak meaningfully if he or she employs such imaginary models of identification.¹⁰ Only an individual who speaks in his or her own name knows how to reconcile him or herself with the symbolic range of his or her existence. According to Lacan, such an acceptance is the goal of psychotherapy.

Human desire, from Lacan's perspective, is not initially oriented towards the other, but rather to the self, even when it has another as its object. Initially, the other only exists to the extent that he or she makes a contribution to the satisfaction of personal needs and to the 'making whole' of one's own identity. Lacan's position is in line with classical developmental psychology; the theories of Jean Piaget, Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, among others, speak of a process of 'de-centering' in which space is gradually created for the other.

As a preliminary summary of our thoughts thus far, we can propose that *the emotional limitation of spontaneous solidarity stands in relation to the level of differentiation with which an individual's personal identity has developed*. Whenever personal identity depends on a limited and therefore vulnerable model of identification, spontaneous solidarity will tend to limit itself to those who do not threaten it. The more differentiated an individual's development, the greater the chance exists that he or she will be able to exercise solidarity towards people with whom he or she is not in agreement. We are aware that a number of problems remain undiscussed here. It is possible that additional ideas would have led to an alternative insight. In any event, the line we have followed so far leads to the notion that one should not simply have blind faith in spontaneous soli-



darity. Such solidarity can perhaps be borne by love but not necessarily love for another. It is not surprising, therefore, that Christian solidarity is not simply a continuation of the feeling of spontaneous solidarity.

The Idea of Christian Solidarity

Christian solidarity is not simply a continuation of spontaneous solidarity because it pertains to everyone, not only the persons with whom we agree but also the persons who may be hostile towards us (Mt 5:43-44; Lk 6:27-28). The Scriptural command to love is motivated with reference to God's love which includes all people (Mt 5:45; Lk 6:35). Such is a formal standpoint which cannot be disclaimed; it belongs as such to the fundamental principles of the Christian faith. In the light of such convictions, every Christian has the task of endeavouring to establish the societal form most suited to the realisation of this principle of solidarity.

The Christian tradition, however, does not postulate the command to love one's neighbour naively. The command is embedded in a system of propositions in which understanding of human weakness is given expression. It is suggested that one's acceptance of one's fellow human beings is not a mere continuation of one's spontaneous human desires. Love of one's neighbour presupposes a conversion whereby one must be prepared to run the risk of being wounded and destroyed by others even before a common understanding has been achieved. The conversion of spontaneous human desire into engagement for the other is represented by a language which is becoming less and less accessible for contemporary people, the language of 'the fall', 'grace' and 'justification'. The tolerance which holds a central place in our manifest Christian faith conviction — perhaps more central than in other reli-

gions — can be elucidated on the basis of these propositions.

The Christian solidarity principle has received even further grounding. Within personalist philosophy, scholars have sought to find the pillars of universal solidarity. Initially this took the form of a continuation of neo-Thomistic philosophy but more recently they tend to base themselves on existentialistic and socio-theoretical explanations in which the unicity of the human person is central. Theology has endeavoured to substantiate a universal principle of solidarity by appealing, among other things, to the concept of experience. Theologians begin with the perspective that for every sincere person injustice is intolerable, and that such a negative observation or contrast-experience opens a perspective on what is in fact just. It is not necessary, however, to ground the Christian principle of solidarity in a philosophy or anthropology. It can support itself as an autonomous datum of faith.

Both the universal principle of solidarity and the Christian function as a beacon, giving direction along a particular course. This beacon presupposes, in the first place, a more well-reasoned sense of responsibility, given that it is not simply a continuation of one's spontaneous emotional life. It presupposes attention, not only for the problems which affect us emotionally but also for problems which have nothing to do with the experience of one's personal identity. It presupposes, in other words, a greater respect for the reasonableness of the situation at hand.

Universal solidarity in the world of politics, for example, is an unrewarding theme. If one is concerned with the results of an election it would seem to be more interesting to appeal to people's spontaneous fear of 'the foreign' using imaginative and often simplistic language, than to appeal to their reasonable insight and motivate them towards an increased sense of responsibility.



Notes

1. Consider, for example, the personalist ethics approach which enjoys much support in the KU Leuven. Its point of departure is in line with the Christian faith tradition that considers every human person as unique and of equal value, irrespective of nationality, gender, language, culture, position, place of origin or intellectual capacity. Such a point of departure implies that 'being in solidarity' means 'being in solidarity with everyone'. Cf. L. BOUCKAERT, G. BOUCKAERT (eds.), *Metafysiek en engagement. Een personalistische visie op gemeenschap en economie*, Leuven, Acco, 1992, p. 326; R. BURGGRAEVE, *Levinas over vrede en mensenrechten* (Cahiers voor vrede-theologie, 3), Leuven/Amersfoort, Acco, 1990, p. 103-123.
2. É. DURKHEIM, *De la division du travail social*. Paris, Alcan, 1893; (Quadrige, 84), Paris, PUF, 1991.
3. Durkheim speaks of 'mechanical' and 'organic' solidarity. In the present text, however, we have attempted to avoid such technical language wherever possible.
4. G. TARDE, *Les lois de l'imitation. Étude sociologique*. Paris, Alcan, 1895.
5. G. LE BON, *Psychologie des foules*. Paris, Alcan, 1895, 1926³⁴; (Quadrige, 14), Paris, PUF, 1983.
6. ID., *op. cit.*, 1926³⁴, p. 42.
7. S. FREUD, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 13, p. 71-161; Eng. Transl.: *Standard Edition*, Vol. 18, p. 67-143.
8. *Standard Edition*, Vol. 18, p. 102.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
10. As Ph. Van Haute has correctly pointed out, the meaning of the concept 'imaginary' found in Lacan's work is out of place in the present context. Taken literally, empty speaking is also symbolic (cf. PH. VAN HAUTE, *Psychoanalyse en filosofie, Het imaginaire en het symbolische in het werk van Jacques Lacan*. Leuven, Uitgeverij Peeters, 1990, p. 72). Likewise, Lacan is not concerned with the literal opposition between the imaginary and the symbolic. He employs these concepts, rather, to refer to the tension between the standpoint of the person who ignores the consequences of symbolic reality and that of the person who takes account of such consequences.