

## On Respect

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Western culture fosters auto-sufficiency which leads to the fragmentation of the self and detachment from the world and are considered to be at the base of the world crisis (Grof & Grof, 1993). This crisis is manifested as increased violence, hunger, environmental pollution, among other calamities (Elgin, 1993). This crisis has a complex character and so it is reasonable to think that the approach to this problem has also a complex nature with several dimensions. In this paper I try to explore my belief that the lack of respect is one of the dimensions, and plays a substantial role in facilitating such a crisis. After elucidating that the nature of life is oneness or connectedness, I will argue that the missing or broken dimension in the chain that connects us is respect. A definition of respect based on Kantian philosophy will be the platform that will support my argument hoping to land on a feasible and practical understanding of the need of respect in order to preserve and move forward to a sustainable world.

#### *The nature of connectedness*

Every day the world is becoming a smaller place to live. The advancement in communication and technology reduces distances and time barriers, and in addition, the capitalist machinery continually conquers the “empty” spaces on earth. One of the advantages of this smaller world is the possibility for increased contact between Eastern and Western cultures. Our increasing exposure to eastern mysticism along with advancements in quantum physics theory have made evident that connectedness is the nature of life. As Capra states (2000, p. 131), “The basic oneness of the universe is not only the central characteristic of the mystical experience, but is also one of the most important revelations of modern physics”

Thus, in the same way as traditions such as Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism suppose the oneness of the universe, modern physics –quantum physics has come to the realization that the simplest elements of matter cannot be fragmented insofar as they only make sense as part of a

whole. In Christianity it is also possible to find the same unifying concept: "all things were created by him and for him...and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:16, 17). In essence, both mysticism as well as quantum physics considers that the universe is a "web of relations" (Capra, 2000, p.138).

The interconnectedness and dynamic characters of the universe are both represented in the Buddhist's idea of the ultimate reality Sunyata (the Void) which is to mysticism as the *field* is to physics. According to quantum theory, particles not only are inseparable but active, in the same sense that the Void "[is] not static and permanent, but dynamic and transitory..." (Capra, 2000). In short, the universe is a ceaseless changing network of living systems embedded one into the other (Capra, 2002). The fact that every living system is nested one into another has two implications. First, from a cell to a human all systems are at the same level, that is, the network is a non-hierarchical compound of living systems. Second, because the living systems are interconnected each part influences the whole in a dynamic way.

Despite that the universe's nature is oneness, the common belief, as noted above, is that the world crisis is the result of disconnectedness and detachment. In fact, different scholars, find a direct relation between global and individual crisis. Walsh (1993, p. 229) for instance summarizes this relation by stating, "our global problems are global symptoms, and the state of the world reflects the state of our minds."

#### *When, how, why we get disconnected? The broken link*

It is paradoxical that while connectedness is the universe's nature, yet the dangers humanity faces are associated with the disconnectedness among humans and from the world. Different explanations for this detachment have been proposed with consideration of social, political, economical, technological, and value systems (Capra, 2000). Abram (1996) for

instance, suggests that the transition from the oral tradition to writing marked the beginning of our separation from the sensuous world as we started de-identifying the words from its earthly origin. We also started to separate from our own selves as writing allowed us to reflect on ourselves when we began to see ourselves as written stories.

Another explanation for the disconnectedness describes how when Descartes arrived at his famous philosophical statement “I think, therefore I am”-“cogito ergo sum”, Westerners began identifying their minds as an entity separate from the body (Capra, 2000). This division was then externalized by separating the self from the outside world.

### *Respect*

So far we have stated three arguments. First, connectedness is the universe’s nature; second, the world is facing a major crisis, and third, this crisis is understood as a reflection of the disconnectedness among humans and from the world. I think, however, that the crisis transcends the purported disconnection among us and from nature. First, because human nature is connection it is therefore contradictory to say we are disconnected, as it would be contradictory to say that the burning nature of fire does not burn. Capra (2000, p. 24), for instance, observes that Buddhism calls this division a fallacy *avidya* –ignorance, which is “our tendency to divide the perceived world into individual and separate things and to experience ourselves as isolated egos in this world is seen as an illusion which comes from our measuring and categorizing mentality.” Second, given the technological advancements in communication nowadays we are more connected than ever. In other words, we cannot avoid contact as it is our nature, we are always in contact, and now more than ever before.

Without denying the social, political, economical, and technological dimensions of the problem, I do believe the issue is not disconnectedness but the quality of connection is

deteriorated. I believe we are connected with one another and with nature in one way or another and despite the increased connections the sense of being connected is missing. In other words, acknowledging the fact that our nature is connectedness, the world crisis is not because of disconnection but it is about how we relate with others and with the universe.

The question now is how the quality of the connection has changed. Whenever two living system interact a series of bridges are built in between. For instance, husband and wife are connected among others, because of their love, their children or for fiscal reasons. Like this example, any other diad implies a set of bridges in between. I think besides the basic humanity that identifies us and bridges us together, respect is the basic link in the chain of our connectedness. It is precisely this basic link that I consider is the missing or broken dimension of our connectedness. What follows is the exploration of the concept of respect on the ground of Kant's doctrine of respect and along three domains the interpersonal, intrapersonal and transpersonal.

*The concept of respect.*

To have or express respect implies a relationship between the one that expresses, or has respect and the object of respect. The word respect is originated from the Latin word “respicere”, which means “to look back at” or “to look again”. In this sense, respect implies an active observation that allows us to see people through their façade, and without one’s limitations or interests.

*Interpersonal domain: Respect for others.*

When one thinks of respect traditionally it is bestowed among people. This tendency to think of respect as unique among people is mostly originated by Kant, who established his theory of morality on the premise that only persons as they are ends in themselves with dignity are

worthy of respect (Kant, 2005). According to Kant (2005, p. 46) respect is an imperative that ought us to “act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only.” To be an end for Kant is to have worth that is not conditioned to any external or internal determinants. This worth that has value in itself corresponds to the dignity. In other words, for Kant, this value is granted not because of the social condition, power, affections or any other distinction but because people are rational beings. Later Kant (1964) argued that people are ends as opposed to means as people can not be *used* for personal interest. With this argument, however, Kant does not condemn *treating* people as means insofar as to live implies to interact and by this we use people’s virtues, as when eating in a restaurant we “use” the chef’s skills for our enjoyment. The problem then is to use people only as if their value is contingent on our interest, which in our example, would be to value the chef according to whether his food pleased us or not.

Since dignity is an absolute value (Kant, 2005), it can not have degrees and since this is a value inherent to all persons, respect is a right not something that has to be earned, as traditionally has been taught. This right does not imply that if a person’s behavior is not morally right he/she is absent of responsibility. Instead, what this right states is that even the morally wrong still preserves dignity although the individual has failed to recognize it in himself or others. Finally, Kant (1964) makes an important distinction between feeling and having respect for others. Basically, since feelings are not under our control, respect cannot be dependent upon emotions. However we can use reason to attribute dignity to other persons and thus have respect.

Failing to see people’s worth or maintaining a relationship with others mediated by personal interests implies to denigrate their dignity. This is how in any relationship for instance

husband and wife losing respect opens a crack in the relationship facilitating feelings of resentment, intolerance, and aggression between them.

*Intrapersonal domain: Self-Respect.*

Another aspect of respect is the respect for oneself. In fact this aspect is regarded as essential for a healthy fulfilling life. Kant (1964) argues that, just as we have a moral duty to respect others as persons, so we have a moral duty to respect ourselves as a person. Extrapolating the understanding so far reached regarding the respect for people, self-respect is related to one's own value. In the same way as respect for people is detached from conditioning, self respect also is granted by the intrinsic value of each individual. Acknowledging the innermost essence, the dignity, is to recognize oneself as a person therefore to be respected. Kant (1964) elucidated how self-respect is most significant insofar as it is necessary in order to respect others.

Failing to see our own worth makes respect for others flawed. Similarly, mistakenly considering our own worth higher or lower than that of other people's worth, conduces to selfishness and grandiosity or to dependency and servilism respectively.

*Transpersonal domain: Respect for Nature and non-human beings.*

Although Kant's philosophy has become the cornerstone of what respect is among people, his doctrine falls short considering anything that is non-human. In general, anything that is not a person can not be seen as an end in itself and therefore not worthy of respect. However, the idea that respect is owed not only to people but to non-human beings as well, is gaining more strength over the past decades. Wood (1998) argues that persons and non-persons have inherent value and so respect is owed to both persons and any sentient beings.

This is a topic still in evolution especially with the recent discoveries in biology and genetics. There has been much debate trying to determine the duty of respect to non person

beings, nevertheless, environmental groups and pro-animal dignity groups are fostering the awareness of the fact that nature is more than a “stock of resources for human civilization” (Abram, 1996, p 28). The hope would be to reach the understanding that “We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human.” (Abram, 1996, p. 22).

Failing to appreciate nature’s worth facilitates its exploitation, the destruction of the species and the environment, compromising our own survival.

### *Knowing*

From the previous discussion it is apparent that *knowledge* is the common thread that appears to be at the basis of respect in each of the aforementioned domains. Fromm, (1989, p. 26) synthesized this relation succinctly: “To respect a person is not possible without knowing him”. More generally, being oblivious of something or someone, ignoring or neglecting it would be not respecting it. Although while Western philosophical knowing is achieved by the exam of the object, “Know thyself”, and in Eastern tradition knowing is developed by opening to the reality of “things as they are,” (Walsh, 1993), both assume that ultimately to understand oneself is to understand others as well. Rinpoche, (1994, p. 129) for instance said that in the Tibetan tradition ““knowing one, you accomplish all.”

This self-knowing and knowing of others is no more important than knowing in the transpersonal domain. Capra (2002, p. 232) sustains that in order to achieve a sustainable world, ecological literacy “must become a critical skill for politicians, business leaders, and professionals … and should be the most important part of education at all levels.” What is interesting is that this “new” knowledge, ecological literacy, is no other than ancient wisdom.

### *Conclusion*

In summary, the previous pages state that connectedness is the nature of the universe, and that the global crisis instead of being the result of disconnection, is related to a shifting in how we connect. More specifically due to the ignorance of ourselves which keeps us from acknowledging the intrinsic value of human and non human beings. This ignorance then translates directly in the way we relate to one another and with the earth, from respectful, healthy, natural relations to perfunctory, unconsidered, relationships.

It seems that in the accelerated world we live in, we do not take or do not have the time “to look again” and so instead of seeing in others and in nature the same intrinsic value as one’s value, people’s worth seems to be measured in how much money they earn or the possessions they own. Similarly, nature’s worth is measured in what it can offer to human kind. The “new” standards to measure value and the time to do it seem to be determined as Capra (2002, p. 128) suggests by “A never-ending stream of advertising messages [which] reinforces people's delusion that the accumulation of material goods is the royal road to happiness, the very purpose of our lives.” This line of thought corresponds to the idea stated above by Grof, that the global crisis reflects our state of mind.

However, from a different perspective, a similar relationship between the global crisis and the individual’s mind was established by Rawls. Rawls (as cited in Scanlon, 1973) observed that there is a connection between how individuals value themselves, and therefore their self-respect and the type of the sociopolitical context in which the individual lives. That is how when the social structures or institutions of a country denigrate their inhabitants it would damage their sense of self respect. The segregation of African-Americans in United States is a clear example of how the social structure affects people’s worth and perceived worth. The way the civil rights

and responsibilities were distributed had a direct impact in how people perceived the value of others and themselves according to the color of the skin (Clark, 1965).

In general, in the same way as it can be said that global crisis is a reflection of the human mind, we also can say that the individual's crisis is a reflection of his sociopolitical context. This reciprocal relationship suggests that the point of entry to address the lack of respect should be done from both perspectives, the individual and the social.

From the individual perspective, different scholars have suggested that to solve the ignorance of ourselves and the unconsciousness of nature, the spiritual path is the answer (Rinponche, 1994). As Capra (2002, p. 68) synthesized, "Spiritual experience is an experience of aliveness of mind and body as a unity.... The central awareness in these spiritual moments is a profound sense of oneness with all, a sense of belonging to the universe as a whole." There is not a doubt that those who follow this path not only are able to value others for their intrinsic worth but can also value nature as well. I think, however, that learning respect is a more feasible task than accomplishing a sense of oneness or encouraging love or compassion for others. Ever since we were children we have been taught, or at least told to respect people, rules, and institutions. Even those who do not learn the lesson properly have a good notion of respect and even demand to be respected. Ultimately the consensus is that respect makes life harmonious (Wood, 1998).

Education on respect has to start by clarifying the concept. Respect is not politeness or political correctness, as they are not universal but limited to a culturally determined set of good manners or ways of acting in public. Respect is not fear and awe, as they are mediated by interests or determined by extrinsic values. Respect is to see a person as he/she is, to be aware that we share the same humanness and therefore she/he is as worthy as I am worthy. Respect is to know that I am a part of a non-hierarchical network of living systems, and so my worth is not

more or less than any other sentient being. Thus, a well taught lesson on respect would make it clear that when a person respects another person, he/she is respecting himself, humanity, and nature.

From the social perspective, it is necessary to implement public health policies oriented to create opportunities to foster respectful social interactions. Porter's (2007) observation of how a "recent study found that life satisfaction in China declined between 1994 and 2007, a period in which average real incomes grew by 250 percent" is a dramatic indicator of how China's economical growth, has shifted their priorities from connection to productivity. While money and material possessions provide comfort, Porter continues, studies have found that "Nonmonetary rewards — like more vacations, or more time with friends or family — are likely to produce more lasting changes in satisfaction."

To revert the negative impact of social structures that concentrate their efforts on becoming more competitive in the global market demeaning the value of its citizens as they become a means to accumulate wealth, Capra (2002, p. 262) suggests "to change the value system underlying the global economy, so as to make it compatible with the demands of human dignity and ecological sustainability." A fine example of how to make human dignity, economical growth, and ecology compatible is the implementation of alternative organic farming that increases production, preserves the environment and improves people's lives. In words of a Zambian farmer benefited from this alternative: "Agroforestry has restored my dignity. My family is no longer hungry; I can even help my neighbours [sic] now" (as cited in Capra, 2002, p. 192).

Lastly, to facilitate the harmony among the social, individual, and global value systems, we need to understand nature and others as living systems, and as ends in themselves. This is possible as Wood (1998) stated:

When we regard ourselves as the ultimate end of nature, we look at nature as a unified and harmonious teleological system – the term for it today would be ‘ecosystem’ – and we undertake the responsibility of shaping our ends in such a way that they provide this system with its crowning unity and harmony. --- this orientation toward nature imposes on us the responsibility both of making sense of nature as a purposive system and then of acting as preservers and guarantors of that system. (p. 20)

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