

# Introduction. The Image of a Moral Compass

## Drawing Attention to the Transcendent Character of the Good in Times of Pluralism and Polarization

*Petruschka Schaafsma*

### 1 A Worrisome Moral Situation

In Western contexts the moral situation is commonly analyzed as worrisome. The reasons to worry can be completely opposed, however. There is a dominant view that characterizes the so-called Western world as being morally at a loss due to the disappearance of widely shared ‘Great Stories’ and the getting diffused of authority. Moral diversity rules – with a corresponding basic feeling of uncertainty which may be intensified by ideals of tolerance or relativist paradigms. People shy away from moral debate. Notions like truth, good, or evil are perceived as too risky to consider because of their apparent pretentiousness or absolutism, which seems to fuel misunderstanding and hostility. To avoid pressure on relationships and to stimulate an open and comfortable atmosphere, moral issues are left aside.

But the opposite analysis is found just as well. The current moral climate is depicted as one of dangerously increasing polarization, nourished by populist rhetoric. People are attracted toward absolutist views with claims of clear insight in what is good or bad, and in the solutions to the great problems of the present day. They are not blind to moral diversity but think in terms of a superior worldview or civilization which needs to be reconfirmed and purified over against suggested alternatives. Populist voices propose simple but radical measures and present them as a matter of course to engage people in a resistance to the established powers. These established powers are dismissed as imposters and are openly contradicted and attacked in social media up to the level of individual death threats.

The fact as such of the opposed character of these worried analyses already indicates their inadequacy. We seem to be in a rather ambiguous moral situation. On the one hand there are clear tendencies to shrink from moral matters, and from judging in particular, in order to stimulate a kind of open-mindedness and a climate of live and let live. On the other, seemingly clear views on moral matters are proclaimed loudly in a

## 2 *Petruschka Schaafsma*

public polemics against opponents. The violent character of the polemics is for some another reason to remain silent in public as regards one's moral views.

What this paradoxical picture does not yet reveal is that, at least in Western settings, the present time is also one in which morality seems to be all over the place. There seem to be stronger impulses for moral discussion than ever, ranging from 'me too,' to reevaluations of the colonial past and 'black lives matter,' to climate shame. People's public and private behavior – especially of the famous and highly responsible – are under a moral magnifying glass, although it remains a riddle why some get away with inappropriate behavior while others are pilloried never to get rid of it. It is remarkable that the range of focal points of this moral scrutiny is so broad, including highly private issues like sexuality, but also animal suffering, or social injustice like racism in past and present. The range includes both left- and right-wing issues. Implicit in debates about these issues are more or less obvious and indisputable standards of good and bad, so that we may even judge other times and other cultures. Slavery and human trafficking are bad regardless of place and time, as are thoughts about a superiority of one 'race,' sex, or sexual orientation over against another.

The quasi-universal status of such moral assumptions – in spite of the lack of their actual broad acceptance and application – does not seem to fit in the picture of either of the opposed analyses that point out moral negligence or populism. Of course, there is a link between open-minded tolerance and the struggle against oppression and marginalization of certain groups of people. Moreover, this struggle may also be expressed in a simplified, populist key. But right-wing populist views oppose precisely the 'leftist' idea that these fights against oppression comprise the crucial moral issues of today. The widespread interest in the above moral issues thus does not match the depictions of the moral climate as being at a loss and silent, or as violently polarized.

An alternative way to analyze the current moral situation is to point out its specific complexity, which may feed both mentioned attitudes of negligence or abandonment, and absolutist engagement. This complexity may be found first in the expanding range of issues that have become morally charged, while a corresponding moral discourse is absent. Take the example of food. Food is increasingly perceived not just as a basic necessity of life or as a pleasure but as a matter of good or bad. Is food healthy or not, is it produced in sustainable ways, is its value accounted for in the practices of consuming it, etc. At the same, this 'goodness' is largely put in non-moral, objective terms, like healthiness or sustainability. And the latter themes are often approached in terms of people's lifestyle, and not so much as a conscious choice in which something morally crucial is at stake. Other factors that add to today's moral complexity are technical innovations that always create previously unforeseen

situations that ask for moral consideration, in particular in the field of medical technology. This leads to an increase in engagement by moral experts in these technologies. The reverse of this is a feeling of incompetence among laypersons due to a lack of specialist knowledge. A growing need of experts to deal with moral issues is also visible in fields of everyday life like upbringing or love relations. A different kind of factor that intensifies moral complexity is the global scale of living together, and of economics in particular. Perceiving of one's acting in terms of its global impact, or its being constituted by a global dynamics introduces a scale which hardly seems manageable for average citizens. It may easily fuel a feeling of paralysis.

As expert knowledge plays such an important role in revealing what is good or bad, science seems a good candidate to fill the vacuum left by the fragmenting of the 'great stories.' In line with this view, empirical facts play a central role in current politics. They should serve to establish common ground. In part, this contributes to the shying away from moral debate: the focus is more on the facts than on the moral framework that has generated them or is needed to evaluate them. On the other hand, recent years have seen a widespread decrease of confidence in the objectivity of science and the coming into existence of the concepts of fake news but also alternative facts. This may be interpreted as partly a result of the strong emphasis on scientifically generated facts and expert knowledge. Over against it, people claim their particular, even personal feelings, emotions and experience as legitimate ground of knowledge. This level of arguing in terms of how people feel about it is explicitly used to oppose the scientific level of facts.

Although all the analyses and aspects mentioned seem only partly insightful or correct, they do give a first impression of the reasons to evaluate the present moral situation in the West as worrisome. Given all the above aspects, it seems to be far from self-evident to enter the moral arena with trust. It is hard to miss the existing pluralism in moral views. Moreover, discussing moral themes is risky both on the level of public debates in the media and the micro level of playground conversations or personal talks among friends or family: one may easily provoke outrage. Common ground seems far from obvious, harsh ad hominem reactions abound in social media and the criticism of not being well-informed is always lurking. While difference on moral matters has always been a potential source of conflict, the violent forms in which opinions are expressed and acted upon may make people even more cautious or reticent in raising moral issues. From where do we derive a reasonable confidence to broach moral subjects? On what do we base the confidence that this will not lead to misunderstanding, alienation, condemnation, and worse?

In these worried questions a lack of trust is apparent in the existence of a common view or experience of 'the good,' or even a suspicion against

#### 4 *Petruschka Schaafsma*

the possibility of a meaningful conversation on the different interpretations of the good. This lack of trust in a shared sensitivity to the good may nourish both extremes of recoiling from thinking through one's moral views and discussing them with others, and of stating one's moral views in violent opposition to those of others. It may also differ per subject whether people recoil or state bluntly. One may wonder whether the extreme forms are widespread. Are people not mostly somewhere in between? What characterizes the sphere in between them? It seems to be the most likely one to find places, settings, or fora for a meaningful conversation on moral issues. Are these settings at all public, visible, or rather mainly private? And how important is a discursive way of engaging in morality? Is it not much more important to make the good concrete in one's acting than to dialogue about it? And is this not what many people in fact do, taking up their responsibilities in the small, local circles of family, friends, and neighborhoods to which they belong and somehow feel obliged?

## 2 A Moral Compass? Calling Attention to the Transcendent Character of the Good

This volume originates in a research program called the Moral Compass Project, situated at the Protestant Theological University in the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> The project recognizes the moral situation in many Western countries as one in which there are many impediments to moral reflection and conversation. But it does not take this as a reason to be gloomy. Rather it investigates a particular way to deal with this situation: by probing the depths of a transcendent understanding of the good. What do we mean with this transcendent character? We first of all indicate with this term that the good goes beyond concrete goods in the world, things, acts, or individual preferences. As a result, the good can never be completely embodied or found fulfilled in the material world. The relationship between concrete goods and the transcendent good, is one of orientation. In trying to think of and do good we orient ourselves toward this transcendent good. But the good is also something that orients us without our conscious seeking of it. It appeals to us in such a way that we cannot ignore or deny it, although we may not always acknowledge it. The transcendent good functions as an opposite that we can never grasp completely. All this may sound pretty abstract. In order to express the practical, down-to-earth implications of this view for everyday life our project flies a metaphorical flag, which shows a compass. We take the expression 'moral compass' as an image to explore morality

<sup>1</sup> The official website of the project is: <https://www.pthu.nl/en/research/research-programmes-before-2020/beliefs/moral-compass-project/>.

as orienting oneself to the transcendent good – such, as a constructive impulse to current moral debate.

Why did we choose the image of a moral compass? A compass is a tool to orient oneself. Its needle always points in the direction of the pole. When the pole is identified as the transcendent good the compass helps to orient oneself to it. The magnetic pole attracts the needle and thus has a very powerful orienting effect. But a compass is unfit to reach the pole itself. Close to the poles, the compass no longer works reliably. Thus, the pole does not come into view itself. The discoverer who claims to have found the pole by means of a compass is using it in the wrong way. In a similar way, the good remains transcendent.

The compass is, moreover, not enough to orient oneself. One also needs a map, and an indication of the declination in the specific area. And, first of all, one needs an awareness of where one is, and an idea of one's destination in order to be able to use the compass meaningfully. Thus, introducing the image of a compass brings with it other images. It does not need much explanation to relate the image of the maps to the plural character of the current moral situation. The map may stand for the conventions of a specific culture, group, and time. Maps differ in their detailedness and may point out different aspects of the area: geological or cultural, displaying only main routes or also unpaved hiking trails. One and the same area may look very differently on different maps. We use different maps to orient ourselves in an area and thus experience our settings differently. The use of somebody else's map is not easy. One needs time to accommodate to different colors, a new scale, or focus of the map. One may moreover disagree on the usefulness of a certain map.

What does the image of the compass add to that of the map? It may serve to become aware of the fact that in spite of the powerfully intrusive experience of diversity, there is also an underlying awareness of the good as something that transcends particular ideas about what is good. People do not continuously experience themselves as inevitably locked in their own 'map', and clashing with people who orient themselves by means of other maps. There are also unexpected moments of recognition of views of others, or conscious attempts to arrive at a common view. When standing up for the rights of others, even others in a completely different setting or time, a good is presupposed that goes beyond individual preference. Also, the status of this good as not relative but true imposes itself at times. People experience their lives as not only being driven wherever the wind of what feels good or makes one happy blows them, but as shut through with moments in which they feel something is at stake and it is not obvious what to think or do. At such moments of moral interruption a desire to 'do what is good' may arise; people feel attracted by the good, although it may not yet be clear what it is. This good is then experienced as of such a kind that it does not just apply

## 6 *Petruschka Schaafsma*

to them alone, but that it is something others can agree to as well. The good is the point of orientation that transcends all maps and yet can only orient in combination with these maps. To orient oneself to the good one needs, besides the map, a moral compass.

Why do we think this image of the moral compass important for the present time? There are two main reasons, which are, paradoxically enough, opposed. First of all it seems important to explore impulses that can contribute to greater trust in the possibility of moral conversation in spite of diversity and polarization. By approaching morality by means of the image of the compass we aim to account for a longing and experience that may be such an impulse. It is the longing for and experience of the good as having value not just for ourselves, but also for others. This good is then imagined or even experienced as outside of ourselves, as not coinciding with concrete views, acts, or agreements. As such, the good is a kind of magnetic pole that attracts. Its attraction is not some particular experience, but potentially common to all people. Second, however, the image of the compass is currently helpful to nourish a critical suspicion against any claims of knowing the good. The image of the moral compass points out that there is never only one way to the good. While people use a compass that points them the same North, they take different paths. Moreover, the pole of the good itself can be seen as absolute but precisely as an absolute pole we cannot reach it with our compass to observe or identify it as realized. It remains transcendent. Neither does its absoluteness put an end to the diversity of maps. Rather, it stimulates the exchange of maps in order to find one's way toward the good. The image of the compass implies that the maps are compatible because there is an underlying agreement on the location of the pole – a pole where we cannot arrive and settle because our moral compass is unfit for it. Nevertheless, the moral compass is indispensable in orienting oneself, in particular in an area in which there are no obvious roads toward the good, or where the obvious roads are blocked due to natural disaster, war or other obstructions.

The image of the moral compass may thus be of help to keep those two movements of finding trust and learning suspicion together. This approach to morality differs from the dominant ones sketched above. It goes against the idea that diversity hinders a meaningful conversation on the good but also against easy suggestions of shared goods as in many populist rhetoric. In addition, it may stimulate moral reflection in an age of increasing globalization and technological developments which easily lead to the feeling of moral problems being beyond the grasp and influence of ordinary citizens. Of course, the use of imagery always has its limits and raises critical questions, or may be misinterpreted if it remains without explanation. The most obvious misunderstanding is that a moral compass would again suggest a moral superiority of some who 'have it' over others who 'miss it.' The meaning of the image itself

seems to contain enough self-cleaning ability to counter this misapprehension. A compass is a neutral instrument. It works independently of who holds it. If one imagines the moral compass to mean all people are basically attracted by the good, the compass is denied to no one. But is not the use of the compass something of experts, the trained outdoor heroes able to survive in the wilderness? That may be true for Western settings of outdoor leisure, but scientists have also discovered a sensitivity to the magnetic fields among certain animals which is used for orientation. Here we are led to the limits of the image, a difference between conscious reading of the compass and following it intuitively. The latter implies going beyond the image of the compass as an instrument made by humans, but it does not seem far-fetched to expand it in this direction. In line with such an instinctive orientation we may explore the idea of an intuitive working of the attraction to the good in human beings.

### **3 Theological Impulses to Considering the Transcendence of the Good**

An understanding of morality as orienting oneself by means of a moral compass relates intimately to the theological nature of the Moral Compass Project. From a theological perspective, taking into account a transcendent dimension is of crucial importance for finding one's way in life. Theologians study where and how transcendence comes to light in everyday life, where and how people experience the sacred. This transcendent dimension has particular explanatory power for believers, but also touches on experiences all people have in common. As regards morality, this sacredness may be related to the experience of the good as not relative to our views and opinions but as an opposite to orient oneself to, a pole that attracts, a call that sounds and cannot be ignored, which breaks open our being closed in on ourselves. The good is transcendent in that it is not exhausted by such experiences but always beyond it and therefore also a critical opposite to judge such experiences.

In the history of theology – often from a time in which this was indistinguishable from philosophy – several concepts have been used to understand the transcendent character of the good and the human sensitivity to it, the moral compass. The idea of a conscience which is somehow inherent in human nature has been a popular notion through the ages, with concrete consequences such as forming the presupposition of the law systems. Less well-known in today's broader society is the notion of a 'divine law' which may also be called a moral 'natural law'. In the Christian tradition this notion has been crucial to reflection on the transcendence of the good. Nourished by both Jewish and antique strands of thinking on law and morality, Christian views have always attempted to balance God's law as a concrete command and God's law as a critique of every human law. As a result, the issue of whether the good is also

something to be, in part or completely, known by nature was answered differently in this tradition as well. Moreover, being or doing good as living in accordance with the natural or divine law or both is never viewed as a human merit but at least also as a divine gift. Thus, the Christian tradition is a valuable source to take into account the issue of morality as oriented toward the good understood as transcendent.

This book investigates what the potential may be of a focus on the good as a transcendent pole for moral orientation in the current moral climate. The above elaboration of the image of the moral compass is a first, tentative way to evoke what may be the value of this focus given the current complexities of moral debate. The contributions of this volume delve into sources of moral reflection in theology and philosophy from different times and traditions in order to find concepts and arguments to critically elaborate on the idea of the transcendent good as the pole toward which our moral compass points. The finds of this delving are related to present-day academic debates on morality as well as to concrete moral issues in society. Below, a brief analysis is given of how the aspect of the transcendent character of the good is addressed in all three parts of the contributions to this volume. The parts correspond to the subprojects that are part of the Moral Compass Project. Each consists of two pairs of chapters, of which the second is a response to the first, although the responses can just as well be read on their own. The first chapters are written by invited scholars, the responses by members of the team of the Moral Compass Project.

The first part contains four contributions that address metaphysical issues implied in the idea of a transcendent good, in particular the issues raised in dialogue with critical, naturalist views. A central issue is that of whether norms and values are to be understood as realist and transcendent. This issue is addressed first from more philosophical points of view, in reflections on love understood as transcending us but also as something in which we are immersed and that directs us. Second, it is approached from a Christian understanding of the world and its morality as displaying the unity of its creator. This unity is an acute issue in moral conversations between different cultures, in particular on human rights. A realist perspective points out that there is a transcendent good that deserves our commitment which makes human beings flourish. The authors differ on how much grip human beings can get on this, and how this insight subsequently finds its way to concrete moral acting.

The second part focuses on epistemological issues. To explore these, contributions from early Protestant theological views on the transcendence of the good prove to be excellent interlocutors. Attention to the question of the (im)possibility of human understanding of the good is central to these views, as the Protestant perspective emphasizes the transcendent, divine nature of the good, and problematizes human understanding of it. The question is discussed of what this means for



human reflective, critical evaluations of concrete moral norms. How may human acting remain attuned to the good in concrete moral acting? How important are concrete laws and especially prohibitions for moral acting and in which sense may they be called divine, and expressions of a kind of ‘moral order’? Is it helpful to understand the human attunement to the transcendent good in terms of the classical notion of virtuousness?

The contributions of the third part, finally, investigate what the value of thinking the good as transcendent may be in relation to two heavily debated issues: euthanasia and the family. In all four chapters, the charged character of the moral debates on these themes is taken as a sign that the good as transcendent is at stake. In these fields of family, terminal illness, and death, ethical reflection does not come to rest in a kind of final judgment on whether certain acts or ways of living are good or not. In the meanwhile, concrete decisions have to be made. How can an awareness of the transcendent character of the good be of help here? In relation to euthanasia such an awareness is elaborated by taking into account the transgressive nature of the act of euthanasia. Regulations should be designed to do justice to this nature, for example in the concrete sense of stimulating a conscientious moral reflection by the medical experts involved. As for moral reflection on the family, introducing transcendence is a very delicate matter, given the pervasiveness of exclusionary conceptions of the family that identify the good with a particular form of the family. Alternatives are discussed which focus on general human precarity and the conscious commitment to the good of the other. Finally, in order to delve deeper into the specific ways in which transcendence is at stake in the family, the approach to the family as a ‘mystery’ is elaborated in relation to concrete moral debates on the family.

Thus, in all contributions to the volume metaphysical, epistemological, and empirical perspectives are present, but the emphasis on each of them differs for the three parts of the book. This leads to a rich discussion of the central question of how attention to the transcendence of the good may be of value in the contemporary moral climate of pluralism and polarization. Below a brief analysis is given of the harvest of these discussions.

#### 4 Implications of Understanding the Transcendent Good as Real

A first metaphysical issue is the question of how the transcendent relates to the material or immanent world. *Fiona Ellis* deals with this aspect by engaging in a dialogue with the central critic of the idea of a transcendent good, that is, with naturalism, which argues that “the natural world is the only world there is” – the “dominant programmatic approach in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy.” (23, 26) Here, naturalism is actually a form of anti-supernaturalism, which argues against “weird entities

and/or realms of being – things like immaterial souls, Platonic forms and divine beings, all of which stand outside the natural world.” (23) According to *Ellis*, however, naturalism is not incompatible with a transcendent dimension. What is more, the fact that we are valuing and, in particular, loving creatures implies that such a dimension must be accounted for in our worldviews. But it should not be understood as dualistically opposed to the world. The dualism of transcendence versus immanence must be put to rest. Rather, love is to be seen as a transcendent reality in which we are immersed. *Ellis* draws on the views of Iris Murdoch to argue for this expanded version of naturalism. Her references to Murdoch also echo the imagery of a moral compass when she speaks of this transcendent reality of love as “magnetic.” (29) As moral beings we are aware of this reality as one to which we should be obedient. But that does not mean love is completely realized by us. It remains a “limit which always recedes.” (26) *Ellis*, unlike Murdoch, argues that this reality may also be conceived in a theistic framework and called God, referring to Tillich, Bonhoeffer and Paul S. Fiddes. Just like love is both a reality in which we are immersed and “that by virtue of which we move towards” (31) love, God’s presence is something in which we participate and which also draws us to the divine. In his response, *Rob Compaijen* points out that Murdoch’s view of transcendence approaches it as a reality. This reality is transcendent in that it is “revealed,” something which exists as “alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal.” (40)

In his contribution *Nigel Biggar* also takes a theist, and realist perspective on morality. While *Ellis*’ aim is to show the atheist naturalist opponents that this is a “position worth taking seriously” (33), *Biggar*’s approach is the other way round. He explicitly starts from Christian belief and subsequently investigates its capacity for moral universality. He finds the basis for Christianity’s universal orientation in the understanding of God as a unity, that is, unrivaled and internally unified. From this unity or sovereignty follows that God’s creation is a “fundamentally coherent and ordered” (52) world, a unified reality also from a moral point of view. This means morality is not a human construction but a reality “given before human thinking and acting,” which *Biggar* calls the good, or human flourishing. The existence of this good means that there are concrete goods in the world that are universal, “things that deserve to be loved, and in loving which human creatures flourish.” This view is corroborated by the actual existence of human rights which are universal, or at least transcend concrete cultural settings and which protect universal goods. This means the transcendent character of the good is here understood primarily as culturally transcendent, which is founded in the unity of God.

The elaborations of the transcendent good in realist and theist terms give rise to the question of how human beings may be aware of this

transcendent reality and orient themselves toward it. *Ellis* deals with this issue briefly when referring to Paul S. Fiddes' relational understanding of God's being: God is the love in which people may partake when standing in loving relationships to others. Thus, love becomes the central notion to elaborate the image of the moral compass. *Biggar* underscores the centrality of love as a critical perspective on concrete laws and human rights, and a duty- or rights-based approach to morality. Love is a duty that surpasses our liberty-rights. *Compaijen's* contribution takes a closer look on the issue by focusing on what Murdoch's thinking may offer to understand the way in which we can attune ourselves to this transcendent reality of love. The term which *Compaijen* highlights in Murdoch is "moral vision" which is further explained as "looking again" (36) at a situation, with attention and with an eye to moral discernment. This idea emphasizes that in spite of its "real" character, the good, or love is not easy to relate to for human beings. The above mentioned "revelation" of the transcendent reality of love requires the "patient eye of love" (39) from human beings. According to *Compaijen*, moral vision may be interpreted concretely in the sense that we become aware of other human beings as really other, independently of ourselves. This implies a critique of the predominant reductionist way of approaching the other by grouping him under a common denominator, or universal category. It also means having an eye for the particular values of the other. All this should be seen as involved in arriving at a concrete discernment of what to do in a specific situation. A good moral vision is further specified as "attention," which implies love, justice, patience and humility. This means transcending our closed self, our selfish nature, or our "fat relentless ego" (46), becoming open to the other independent of us instead of making others into objects of our (dis)liking.

Murdoch focuses on a change in perception – "looking again" – in order to grow in awareness of the transcendent reality of love or the good. *Compaijen* distinguishes this approach to moral discernment from a more discursive or cognitive one in terms of reasoning or deliberation. For the latter he finds too little attention in Murdoch. This is understandable given her characterization of morality as obedience, and in that sense a necessity, but her view does not account for real differences in morality. This is a problem which *Maarten Wisse* also raises in his response to *Biggar's* contribution. *Biggar's* realist approach to the good on the basis of God's unity claims to be compatible with the recognition of the plurality of concrete moral views. The latter are interpretations of the universal moral principles. Concrete law systems shaped by specific cultural circumstances protect universal goods. *Wisse* analyses this unifying thinking about morality as inspired by an Enlightenment approach, directed at finding objective foundations underlying diversity. He subsequently questions it by asking whether it does not in the end regard moral difference as regrettable and a result of sin or evil, but also

as not real. To overcome this problem, *Wisse* introduces an Augustinian approach, in which love is again the central notion. For Augustine, love is love for God or the highest good and therefore identical with justice and the fulfillment of human life. In creation this love is present and guiding. That does not mean that there is a direct or complete sensitivity or access to the good for human beings. In that sense the good remains transcendent. This has to do with sin, the fact that human beings are not in the highest possible way directed toward God in their love as a result of which love for the neighbor and the self lose their embedding. On the other hand, the sensitivity to the good is never completely lost. Human beings can be reminded of the good – an idea which calls to mind the moral compass image. On the other hand, it is only through faith in Christ or grace that one may grow in love and righteousness. It is the presence of this “Transcendent Third” (78) among us that grounds and reveals the creatureliness of all human beings and thus enables to live with real differences. This reminds of Murdoch’s transcendent love which enables to be attentive of others as really different from ourselves instead of objects of our desire or our competitors. But for Murdoch this love does not need to be identified with God.

## 5 Attuned to the Transcendent Good?

The central question of Part II of this volume is what the specific place or role is of God or Christ in being attuned to the good, as distinguished from a general human sensitivity or inclination to the good. A particular tradition, that of Protestant Christianity, is explored for its clarifying potential as regards this question because this has put more emphasis on the divine role than other Christian or Abrahamic traditions. Thus, a Protestant perspective has long been understood as characterized by a primacy of divine law in contrast to natural law and cultivation of virtues. *Jennifer Herdt* points out the recent correction of this picture in theological ethics on the basis of a renewed reading of the Reformation sources. On the basis of this revision, *Herdt* elaborates a view of the human telos of virtuousness which may very well be read in line with the image of the compass. Conforming to recent readings of Aristotelian virtue ethics *Herdt* emphasizes the good as independent from human beings, but also as that to which they are inclined by nature. What makes them moral agents is their reflexive capacity to ask whether something is good. This capacity is of course shaped by our social embeddedness which brings along specific norms. The correctness of such norms can be debated critically, which does not do away with the truth value they have. There are thus myriad goods and ways to respond to them. Theology may contribute precisely to a better understanding of this relation of the one good to the plurality of goods by pointing out the character of creation. God’s goodness is refracted in the myriad forms of creaturely

goodness. This allows for an acknowledgment of each specific goodness as different but also as really good because of its common source and ground in the one good.

In his response, *Pieter Vos* affirms *Herdt's* view of Protestants ethics as compatible with Aristotelian virtue ethics, but localizes the theological contribution in a different area. According to *Vos*, an Aristotelian natural law approach does not give enough insight into the transcendent character of our norms. It is precisely this aspect that may be elaborated by drawing on Protestant understandings of divine law. These reveal that there is not just normativity as an ongoing dialogical, critical process of protecting the myriad forms of goodness, but also at a transcendent, in the sense of a more general, perhaps even universal level of basic moral boundaries, indicated precisely by the “though shalt not” commandments of the Decalogue. Transcendence is also at stake in the unconditional moment of experiencing the call to responsibility. This moment should be distinguished from concrete duties based on particular norms. Divine law may then be seen as “the demand of responsibility itself” (119) which I experience as not laid upon me by myself. When such a transcendent moment is accounted for, a different view arises of the process of critical reflection on particular practices and valuations than with *Herdt's* naturalism. It creates a free space beyond that limited by concrete norms and thus enables a critique of these norms. As a result, the individual person is more emphatically in view as the one who has to do right. The human being stands before God which means an accountability which cannot be covered by our human understandings of natural or divine law alike.

*David VanDrunen* and *Dominique Klamer* also point out the importance of the transcendence of the divine law but relate this to a different aspect of Aristotelian ethics, that of virtue. They do so in close reference to early Reformed theological ethics. This aspect of virtue is important to do justice to both the transcendent moment of morality and the actual good practice in the material world. In that sense the concept of virtue may be paralleled to the idea of the moral compass. Virtues orient people toward the transcendent and in that sense objective good of the divine law. According to *VanDrunen* they “illuminate the law’s requirements” and “enable people to do what divine law requires.” (129–30) But in order to know what the virtues are, the Aristotelean guidelines of prudence and reason embodied in virtuous persons are not enough because they involve a circularity. They do not provide a normative standard to evaluate habits and persons as they, in the end, refer back to themselves. Divine law does provide such a standard by prescribing what we should or should not do. This reminds of the first moment of transcendence as a general normative standard indicated by *Vos*. Second, *VanDrunen* finds in early Reformed theology’s view of divine law a strong transcendent moment in that it orients virtue to God, and thus escapes the immanent

self-referentiality of Aristotle. Finally, the transcendent character is clear in that divine law should not be understood in terms of a series of rules, but as a moral order. Again, this is already implied in the virtues, which orient not toward specific concrete goods, but describe “an attitude or a posture – a way of living in this world.” (131) This understanding of law as moral order subsequently gives room to the concrete diversity of “living properly.” (135)

*Klamer* further specifies early Reformed views of the relation between divine law and virtue in reference to the thinking of Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706). Here *VanDrunen’s* understanding of divine law as “moral order” becomes clear in that virtues are not to be understood as “outward” doing of what is commanded or a “blind obedience.” (145–6) They just as well imply an “inward” moment of doing it “with the heart, not with the mouth, gestures and whatever external instruments,” that is “a confident obedience.” This moral order is universal. The biblical divine law of the Decalogue should be understood as an “abridgement of the virtues.” (140) Natural and divinely revealed law are thus not in tension with each other for Van Mastricht. They are both to be seen as expressions of God’s very own nature – an understanding which reminds of *Biggar’s* founding of universal moral law in God’s unified being. Apart from the attention to the inward and outward aspects of doing the good, the concept of virtue also enables to understand a growth in goodness.

## 6 Probing the Meaning of the Transcendent Good in Debates on Euthanasia and Family

The third part of this volume probes the value of the idea of the moral orientation to the transcendent good in two concrete fields of morality, that of reflection on euthanasia and family. *Willem Lemmens* starts from the observation that although the Belgian euthanasia policy, established in 2002, seems to be widely accepted, a closer look reveals an ongoing, unsettled public debate. In his analysis of why this is the case, he points out that although euthanasia belongs to the domain of medicine, it is a non-therapeutic act. This character is prominent in particular in the case of unbearable suffering in which death is not at all imminent, like in psychiatric diseases, or dementia. *Lemmens* specifies euthanasia as an act of moral and existential transgression. While medical acts are in general transgressive, euthanasia is so in a morally charged, existential sense because it is not about healing but about actively ending life. As a result, the doctor is never just addressed in his medical expertise but also as a morally responsible human person, who is supposed to act “in good conscience.” This means that euthanasia is an area of medical practice with less clear criteria. It cannot completely be captured as a “purely contractual-procedural act,” or a sort of right of patients. It will never become completely normalized but always lead to debate, as

is underlined by current reports of individual conflicts of conscience, disagreement between doctors on a specific case, or between loved ones and medical staff.

According to *Lemmens*, this embarrassment concerning euthanasia is clearly a good thing. But he notices that public opinion holds a different view. Here, euthanasia is presented as a normalized or standardized issue. It is the morally correct way of dealing with human finitude, covered by the law. The critics of euthanasia are mostly characterized as conservative or inhumane, and accused of lacking respect for the autonomy of human beings. The law has thus become the first and last framework to discuss euthanasia. In *Lemmens's* view, this status implies that it is something to hide behind, in order to leave the aspect of conscience out of the picture. In terms of our moral compass image this could be expressed as that a compass is there in the form of human conscience, but that it has no embedding. The reigning policy and law do not stimulate an appeal to conscience and thus an active orientation to the transcendent good. Moreover, a sensitivity to the transcendent character of the good is not stimulated when the law is regarded as a morally adequate procedure of dealing with the transgressive act of the ending of a life. Finally, the transcendent nature of the good in the sense of having a sacred dimension is not easily acknowledged, although this sacred character is obviously acute in acts related to the liminal moments of birth and death. *Lemmens* is convinced that this sensitivity, and thus our conscience as a moral compass are still present, which he sees confirmed in the fact that euthanasia remains controversial.

In their response *Theo Boer* and *Stef Groenewoud* join *Lemmens's* analysis that the special, transgressive character of euthanasia requires continuous and comprehensive moral reflection. But they are more pessimistic as regards the aliveness of this reflection in practice. The current euthanasia policy of Belgium and the Netherlands does not give the impulses needed to stimulate a practice of deep moral reflection. In fact, only a small proportion of euthanasia reports are discussed with ethical experts. The procedure has largely become a juridical one, although the number of euthanasia cases and the complexity of the cases have increased significantly over the past two decades. How then to "succeed in upholding a public awareness of euthanasia's transgressive character?" (177) For legal incentives do influence people's behavior and character.

*Boer* and *Groenewoud* give examples of opposite tendencies in current Dutch society. On the one hand, current regulations do not stimulate physicians to reflect on euthanasia cases morally, and even actively oppose it in procedures that follow when irregularities are found. On the other hand, it is clear that euthanasia nevertheless continues to be transgressive for many people and in many situations. The authors refer to their recent empirical research to underpin this claim. In interviews with relatives of people who had euthanasia the transgressive nature is

clear both from the positive and negative experiences. It is clearly not a “natural, peaceful, and pain-free death”(187), in their view. A recent quantitative investigation, second, reveals great regional differences in euthanasia incidence in the Netherlands, varying from a standard option in cases of fatal illness to being practically absent. Another study shows a similar wide range of views among pastors and members of the main Dutch Protestant church. Pastors have a lot of experience with situations of euthanasia, but opinions on it vary among them as well as among their parishioners. These empirical findings point out how important a thorough moral conversation on euthanasia is that appeals to the individual’s conscience. The current legislation does all but stimulate this. A reconsidering of the exceptional and transgressive character of euthanasia implies a sensitivity to the transcendent character of the good that is never covered by legislation. Such a reconsideration can be a very concrete way of putting the moral character back on the agenda that may appeal to both proponents and opponents.

In the second field of morality that is explored, that of family life and moral responsibilities, the starting point is not a concrete moral issue, but rather the meta-question of how transcendence is at stake here. *Cristina Traina* first points out that this is a risky question to explore. All too often, transcendence is at stake in the sense of a specific form of family that is claimed as normative, especially on religious grounds, and thus leads to exclusion of all the other forms. This is the main reason family has become an “ideologically and politically fraught” (193) subject, even “hopelessly poisoned.” (194) Therefore, *Traina* starts from a strong awareness of the great diversity of family forms through the ages, also in Christian settings in which marriage was privileged. What families in their diversity have in common is that they tie people to a past and a future, to people from different times, even people far way. As such, family runs against current tendencies of individualism and voluntarism, as family concerns largely unchosen relationships. Family makes one aware “that we are always already connected to all people through a network of intimate bonds.” (196) “The human family” is literal, not metaphorical.

To further elucidate this familial connectedness, *Traina* turns to Judith Butler’s view of human connectedness as originating in our “shared bodily precarity.” This precarity puts us in a situation of unchosen “global cohabitation.” This implies an appeal, a call: people feel for each other in this vulnerability, experience an obligation to care for others, even distant others of whose disasters we only know via the media. It is here that transcendence is at stake, according to *Traina*. People transcend themselves by being “called out of themselves” (197, 202) to others in their precarity. They do not choose to be called. But the “pledge that ideally follows” (203) this call should be voluntary. This pledge consists in a “dedication to a shared good beyond oneself that includes oneself, a



transcendent good that can be had only through intimate commitment and care to others individually and in community.” (203) The concrete implications of this commitment vary by time and place and for each family. As such families are a “school and platform for broader networks of justice” (202), that is, for dedication to a transcendent good. But they also open us to transcendent goods “inaccessible to us in isolation.” (204) Our voluntary commitment to others “draws upon power that we do not generate ourselves.” (203) This power has to do with the reciprocal character of dependence: others depend upon us just like we on them. Christians speak of God’s grace to name this power. Experiences of precarity are part of ordinary life. Such experiences may be acknowledged as “transcendent goods” precisely in sacramental acts and theological understandings of this sacramental character. An eye for sacramentality reveals ordinary experiences of love and solidarity in the family as “open[ing] us to transcendent realities inaccessible to us in isolation.” It is this kind of non-exclusive transcendence *Traina* is looking for: an “acknowledging and consecrating of ordinary life’s transcendence without tying that consecration to a single form.” (204) Thus, she aims to overcome the poisoned character of the family as a moral theme.

In my response to *Traina* in the final article of this volume, I evaluate the contribution of her approach to the fraught moral debate on the family. First, I point out how difficult it is to account for the specific character of the call out of ourselves in the context of the family if one starts from precarity and the variety of family forms. A closer analysis of Butler’s thinking reveals that family is a theme this is remarkably absent in her reflections on precarity and unchosen cohabitation. In her work on *Antigone*, she rather proposes a radical kinship perspective that does not reduce it the family. The reason for it is precisely the exclusionary character of the notion of family, which Butler experiences fiercely in her own life. This suspicion against understanding the family as a distinct phenomenon, also in a moral sense, is, obviously, more broadly present and hinders open moral discussion. It seems difficult to overcome this suspicion by seeking common ground among all conversation partners in a focus on our general human precarity and the implied call to care, because this does not sensitize to the specific complexities of “familial cohabitation.” Therefore I consider two different ways of approaching the theme of the family, that of family as symbol and as mystery.

For the symbolic mode of approaching the family I refer to the French philosopher Jean-Philippe Pierron. He proposes a symbolic understanding as an alternative to the prevailing views of idealization of a “model family,” instrumentalization for a political or economic purpose, and relativistic views that no longer regard family as a meaningful structure. Specific to a symbolic understanding is its ability to express an ambiguity or dialectics of seemingly opposed meanings. In the symbol of the family this dialectics concerns that of sameness and difference.

An active entering into this dialectics is needed to arrive at the recognizing of oneself in a “lineage” (219) which extends to the past and the future. This recognition is crucial for being human. Symbols stimulate an open way of engaging in this project of recognition while also expressing what is characteristic of the family. While I regard the attention to the irresolvable ambiguity as a crucial contribution to moral conversation on the family, Pierron’s elaboration of it in terms of recognition seems to specify the tension too quickly. A stronger emphasis on the inextricable givenness of familial belonging or dependence is found in the mystery approach of Gabriel Marcel. He distinguishes the family as mystery from an approach to it as a problem. While the latter differentiates between all kinds of problematic aspects of family in order to solve them, mystery aim for an understanding of the continuity in these aspects. In elaborating this approach, much thought is given to the attitude that is required for it: one of respect and piety. Thus, life in all its complexity may be experienced in the family as a gift, something to receive and pass on. Marcel regards this as a transcendent moment of catching “a glimpse of the meaning of the sacred bond which it is man’s lot to form with life.” (220)

The attention to the attitude needed to discuss the moral character of the family is in my view a promising approach to get beyond the current poisoned nature of the topic of the family. The sensitivity to the transcendent moment in experiencing the family inherent in a mystery approach may create a common ground in topical moral conversations. I elaborate this for three sites of conversation on the family in politics, social work, and euthanasia. In all these settings attention to the specific unnameable yet strong experience of the givenness of being dependent on one another, or of an “inextricable belonging” (219) and of the “call out of ourselves” is helpful. It elucidates the self-evident appeal of governments on the family for care, the difficulties of dealing with loyalty and care in families by social workers and the shying away of the role of the family in euthanasia wishes. These conversations are too important for the moral health of current societies to leave to politicians, social workers, or medical experts. As family plays a role in all our everyday lives, even when it is practically absent, it is a likely phenomenon to initiate moral conversation. A mystery approach to the topic with its sensitivity to the transcendent moment may lift such conversations above the current polarized debates, or relativist disinterest.

## 7 Academic Reflection and Public Debate

This volume is the first joint international academic publication in the Moral Compass Project. The above analyses reveal both the breadth of the project and its coherence. In the articles, as in the subprojects, the topic of the transcendent good is addressed at different levels: meta-physical, epistemological, and empirical. But the contributions are held

together by a shared horizon. This is the urgency of finding new ways of ethical reflection in the current moral climate with its paradoxical pairing of moralism, polarization, absolutism, and relativism. The commitment to this task finds its way in a next overarching theme to discuss in an academic international conference in 2022: the search for moral common ground. A way to reach a broader audience is the development of an annual, national public campaign in the Netherlands starting in 2022 which aims to stimulate reflection on how moral issues are currently discussed and practice alternative ways of conversation. Using creative cross-media forms – for example, theater combined with short, in-depth video clips, and live discussion – participants are encouraged to have a fundamental conversation about what is good, beyond the rigid and polarized discussions. Reflection on the experiences in this public campaign will subsequently also provide input for the ongoing ethical research in the project. Thus, the Moral Compass Project aims to bridge the gap that all too often exists between academic and everyday moral debates. On the other hand, much room is given, also in this volume, to relating the big moral issues of today to insights from the past and to fundamental approaches. This double approach is characteristic of a theology that aims to be deeply rooted and broadly oriented, sharp-minded and rich in spirituality, which are the core values of the Protestant Theological University where the Moral Compass Project is situated. This volume gives an impression of what such a theology may look like.