

# Personal Reflections

## The Moral Field

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### Introduction

This article originated in a research project about the connection between family constellations work and the meaning of life (Vos, 2009). Participating in a family constellation is regarded as an accessible way of gaining insight into the emotional bonds that exist within our family and our role within the family system. Although the intricate workings of constellations are not fully understood, many participants claim that they have had a considerable positive effect on their lives.

Family constellations work in practice is evolving rapidly. Individual facilitators for instance, enrich the traditional methodology with their personal perspectives and preferences, and constellations work is applied over diverse areas (e.g. organisations, education, psychological trauma and personal growth). However, the workings and effects of this method are not yet fully understood. In this article we will look at constellations work from the perspective of finding meaning in life, particularly from the perspective of morality. Also,

some suggestions are made for gaining a better understanding of the effects of constellations work. In this way we hope to contribute to the development of the methodology.

According to the existential psychotherapists (Frankl, 1946/1984; May, 1983; Van Deurzen, 2002; Yalom, 1980 and others) having a sense of meaning is important for people to live a fulfilling life. With this we do not assume that life *has* a meaning, but that people live a fulfilling life when they succeed in actively *giving* meaning to

their daily occupations, their striving, their relationships, and so on. It is our assumption that successful family constellations contribute to this sense of meaning. Sometimes they may do so by disclosing hidden family histories. At other times they unravel the patterns of relationship and loyalty that influence our feelings of identity and our bonds with family members.

Constellation work aims to help us find a balance between autonomy and relatedness, between distance and closeness and between authenticity and loyalty. In our approach we focus on the authenticity of the client and help him become aware of his system of beliefs and the moral framework in which they are contained, thus giving him the opportunity to re-define his beliefs or adopt a new position.

### Family constellations according to Hellinger: three types of conscience

#### ***The paradox of the collective conscience***

Hellinger considers the family as the basic social unit in which people grow up and to which they remain emotionally attached for the rest of their lives. Every family member has the right to belong and no-one should be excluded. Family relationships persist beyond physical presence and geographical proximity and even past death. Unknown parents, prematurely deceased brothers or sisters and deceased grandparents one may never have known, remain part of the family system and continue to exercise their moral and emotional influence, even after they are gone.

Family systems have a memory in which events and mutual exchanges are stored in specific ways. (Preiss, 2008, p. 71). Hellinger refers to the laws that govern this memory as *conscience*. Conscience can be regarded as a balancing mechanism for interpersonal connections. It is the basic concept which Hellinger uses for analysing and resolving problematic

family relationships. He distinguishes between a personal, a collective and a transcendent or spiritual conscience.

The personal conscience consists of an individual's understanding of the standards and values implicit in actual interactions. This conscience enables the individual to experience a sense of belonging to his family, his partner and his social environment. The personal conscience manifests itself through feelings of guilt and innocence. Feelings of guilt indicate that a person acts from a troubled conscience with respect to his reference group. Feelings of innocence indicate that he or she is loyal to this reference group (see para.3).

The collective conscience (also known as the family conscience) ensures the continuity of the family system as a whole. This conscience cannot be seen or perceived directly. It contains unspoken and unconsidered convictions and implicit expectations between the members of the family system. The collective conscience fulfils the need to belong (everybody deserves a place), the need for balance (between give and take), and the need for order (maintaining the hierarchy within the family). These aspects of the collective conscience maintain the balance in the family system over time, without subsequent generations necessarily being aware of it. However, emotional issues that have not been dealt with may cause an imbalance in the family system. Unresolved issues show up again in subsequent generations through the collective memory of the family system that records and transfers these issues from one generation to the next. A descendant will (unconsciously) strive for recovery of the balance by trying to solve or alleviate the suffering of an ancestor. This is what Hellinger calls *entanglement*.

Hellinger states that everyone is solely responsible for his own fate and he considers it presumptuous when somebody adopts the fate of an ancestor (Preiss, 2008, p. 75). It does not alter the original fate and

does not reduce the initial suffering. Instead, this striving for the recovery of balance across generations disrupts the hierarchical order in the family system, which renders it impossible to obey the law of balance and the law of order simultaneously. The collective conscience paradoxically forces later generations to restore the balance, whilst at the same time prohibiting them from disobeying the law of hierarchy.

#### ***The personal conscience and the desire for bonding***

Why does someone adopt an ancestor's burden and become entangled? This has to do with the personal conscience which is subject to the same laws as the collective conscience: it strives for bonding, balance and order. When there are no unresolved issues there is no reason why one should become entangled. But when families are struck by disaster (e.g. the death of a child or a war trauma), the development of a secure and supportive emotional attachment between child and parent is threatened. If the need for such a stable attachment cannot be satisfied, the child will experience this as guilt and will try to prevent these feelings.

*"This explains that our conscience is clean when we are confident that we belong. And that our conscience is troubled when we fear losing our bonds. The conscience enables us to become aware of exactly what we should do and avoid doing in order to maintain our sense of belonging."*  
(Hellinger, 2006, p. 76).

Loyal conduct, emerging from the fundamental need to belong, prevents or diminishes feelings of guilt. This need expresses itself in a love that binds the family members together. However, when that love operates blindly

*"the family whole binds each member so firmly that the*

*obligations and sufferings of one member are experienced by other members as debts and obligations. In this way, any family member can become blindly entangled in other members' debts and privileges; in their thoughts, cares, and feelings; and in their conflicts or goals.*" (Hellinger, 1998, p. 160).

This implies that anyone who wants to grow and broaden his perspective has to accept feelings of guilt. Innocence is limiting.

### **The transcendental or spiritual conscience: from psychological to spiritual labelling**

According to Hellinger, in order to lead a healthy and happy life we need to repair problematic family relations and solve the paradox formulated at the end of para. 2. In other words, the laws of bonding, balance and order should be followed. The restoration of healthy family relationships requires reconciliation – the client relinquishes any needs from his youth that can't be satisfied anymore, and develops an attitude of gratitude and humility instead.

Hellinger states the following:

*"We could believe that we control guilt and innocence with our good behaviour. (...) When guilt and damage reach tragic dimensions and become our fate, reconciliation is only possible if we relinquish compensation completely. The only possibility then open to us is submission, to choose to surrender to the inexorable force of destiny, to either our advantage or our disadvantage. We may call the inner attitude that makes it possible to surrender in this way humility; that is, a humble forgiveness and submission to true helplessness."* (Hellinger, 1998, pp. 25-26).

Hellinger does not explain how the transcendental or spiritual conscience operates, but he emphasises that it integrates hitherto separate phenomena and brings them into a larger whole (Hellinger, 2006, p. 84). He also refers to this conscience as 'the other conscience' (ibid, p. 32), as 'The Greater Soul' (Hellinger, 1998, p. 190) and as 'the level of the movement of the soul' (Hellinger, 2006, p. 84). Hellinger says the following about the relationship between the transcendental conscience and the aforementioned personal and collective conscience:

*"We have been raised in such a way that we long to be very conscientious. It is this desire to be conscientious that causes quite some unhappiness, failures, accidents and suicides. For example as a consequence of the internally used sentence: 'I follow in your footsteps', or: 'I instead of you'. To avoid these negative consequences someone should undergo a certain cleansing, enabling him to transcend the boundaries of this conscience to a higher level where other laws apply. This would be the level of the soul in a broader sense, it is the level of the movements of the soul."* (ibid, p. 84).

Our interpretation of the humility demanded at the end of a family constellation is that of subservience to the Greater Soul in a different experiential reality. The reconciliation with parents or between offenders

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and victims is brought about by removing contradictions and dualities on this level. Acceptance of one's fate and reconciliation with an offender is actually only possible if negative emotions are transcended and replaced by humility and gratitude.

Considering the foregoing explanation of Hellinger's view on conscience, we cannot deny the moral dimension of family constellations work: life is sacred; the bond with parents demands respect, regardless of what has happened; there is a compelling focus on solving and transcending dualities.

The transcendental conscience is Hellinger's solution for the paradox at the end of para 2. Here, he shifts from psychological language to a religious or spiritual jargon. This spiritual nature also shows itself in the constellation practice, for instance in the ritual bowing to the 'gift of life' to thank those who came before us. The personal and collective conscience can be considered as psychological categories, but the psychological status of the transcendental conscience is vague with respect to its origins and functioning. Moreover, the client is paradoxically required to be humble in order to let go of and to transcend negative feelings, but he is at the same time required to develop feelings of guilt in order to grow.

### **Recovery: interpersonal or intrapsychic?**

The aforementioned raises questions and is not without problems. Psychotherapist Franz Ruppert, for instance, raises some serious objections to the traditional constellations method of Hellinger (Ruppert, 2010, pp. 221-227), without, however, rejecting the method itself. He observes that some aspects may pose severe emotional problems to a client, for instance the closing ritual of a traditional constellation: the child shows gratitude to his parents for the life he has been given and bows in order to honour them (ibid,

p. 224). Ruppert believes that this sign of submission can prove to be a re-traumatising experience for the client. It strengthens the illusion of the possibility of recovery of the ‘*order of love*’, or reconciliation between the family members no matter what happened in the past (ibid, p. 225).

Furthermore, it is suggested that the original trauma is somehow transferred across family relationships and generations, rather than traumatisation recurring in actual interactions. Ruppert raises doubts about whether the traditional method really promotes the autonomy of the client or whether it commands an attitude of humility and submission.

The differences between Hellinger and Ruppert lead to different therapeutic goals. Hellinger considers the problems to stem from the family system. He seeks a solution in uncovering unresolved issues and restoring family relationships through reconciliation. His focus is on the recovery of the system as a whole by transcending the dualities. Laws of personal and collective conscience determine the optimal position for the client.

Ruppert also assumes that the origin of psychological problems is to be found within the family system. However, he does not agree that the solution lies on the level of family relationships. His focus is on acknowledging the reality of the traumas within individuals. This means that the solution is intrapsychic in nature, and consists of abandoning illusions of reconciliation and removing dissociations. This enables the client to find his own autonomous position.

## The Moral Field

### *Moral framework*

An alternative view of constellations work would be to regard it as a way of giving meaning to life. We have to relate to life, mankind and the world around us and to the developments and events that concern us, throughout our lives. This process raises

questions like: ‘Who am I? Who do I want to be?’; ‘How do I feel about life, about my own life?’ or ‘What is my view on the world and where do I stand?’ This continuous process of giving meaning leads us to develop a particular stance in terms of how we perceive life and the world around us.

Finding meaning in life can be considered to refer to several distinct but related tasks (Mooren, 1998). These tasks are directed towards five elements of the life stance. *Meaning of life* can be understood as referring to commitment to a *purpose in life*; as having a sense of understanding when our *world-view* fits in with our own experiences; as living with a feeling of self-worth resulting from a match between a positive self-image and a *general image of man*; as having peace of mind because we are living according to our own *values and moral principles*; and as experiencing a feeling of competence because our behaviour is sustained by the *principles of conduct* that every life stance offers. These five areas, although differentiated for analytical ends, in reality are closely related and overlapping, which illustrates that ‘*meaning connects things*’ (Baumeister, 1991, p. 15).

Morality can be understood as just one dimension of the meaning of life, or, according to the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, as a much broader concept, which addresses both the question of what it is worth pursuing in life and the question of who we are – our identity. Each of us has some ideas, however vague or implicit, about what is worth pursuing and what is of minor importance. Articulating what makes sense to us is to make our moral framework explicit. This framework is not a given fact, but the result of a building process in which pre-disposition, upbringing, culture and personal experience acquired during our life all play a part. Its development continues throughout our lives.

According to Taylor, man inherently has a moral framework. Frameworks provide the background, explicit or implicit, for our moral judgements,

intuitions or reactions (Taylor, 1989, p. 26). To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is worth doing and what isn’t, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary (ibid, p. 28).

The family system is people’s initial framework for giving meaning to what happens in their lives. In our upbringing we are persuaded to see things the same way as our mentors and teachers do and we acquire their values and views. By interacting with our primary reference group we learn the meaning of feelings like love, fear and loss. This learning is not always a process of active transference of knowledge. Values and meanings are largely conveyed without words and the corresponding gestures, attitudes, facial expressions and positions are self-evident to us.

People partly derive their standards and values, their moral framework, from what Taylor calls a *moral order* (Taylor, 2007, pp. 159-176). The moral order is a prevailing idea about how people should live together. It contains specific standards and values, as well as ontological statements about what is right for man and the world. The way people think about family relationships is a fundamental part of this moral order. The modern predicament is that there is a plurality of views.

The language used in family constellations, like statements about what a healthy family relationship looks like, signifies a specific moral order. These statements take the form of metaphors. Lakoff & Johnson, who did impressive research into the metaphoric nature of our language, state that virtually all of our abstract moral concepts are defined by metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 325). They claim that ‘*the range of metaphors that define our moral concepts is fairly restricted,*’ and that they appear to be grounded in experiences of well-being (ibid, p. 290).

One of the metaphors we use to express our well-being is 'wealth' (ibid. p. 292): "It is the basis for a massive metaphor system, by which we understand our moral interactions, obligations, and responsibilities." The most important system of metaphors in this area is 'the moral accounting metaphor'. "Increasing others' well-being is metaphorically increasing their wealth. (...) This gives you a moral credit; doing them harm creates a moral debt. (...) Justice is when moral books are balanced." (ibid, pp. 292-293). The source domain of the metaphor, financial transactions,

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has itself moral implications: it is moral to pay your debts. Within this general scheme variations can be found: a focus on reciprocation, on retribution and revenge, on restitution, on altruism, on moral I.O.U.'s, etc.

This moral accounting metaphor shows itself for instance when Hellinger speaks about consciousness as the balance between give and take, about people's right to their own destiny, debts and privileges, obligations, retributions for injustices, etc.

From this metaphorical language we can deduce Hellinger's moral framework by referring to the five areas of the life stance mentioned above: *purpose in life (PL)*, *world-*

*view (WV)*, *general image of man (IM)*, *values and moral principles (VMP)* and *principles of conduct (PC)*.

Hellinger considers the relationship between men and women to be the foundation of the family (Hellinger, 1998, p. 44) (*WV, IM, VMP*); children ought to take their place in the family order (*PL, WV, IM, VMP*), which means they respect their parents and show gratitude no matter what might have happened (*PC*); offenders and victims ought to reconcile (*VMP, PC*); all beings are entangled and in that sense all are equal (Hellinger, 2006, p. 32) (*IM*). Our personal and collective conscience takes away our freedom but when we can rise above its boundaries, we can clear the road for "the other love" which transcends all dualities (ibid, p. 33) (*PL, PC*).

#### From 'knowing' field to 'moral' field

A central concept in family constellations is the 'knowing field'. This is an indication for the information representatives have at their disposal:

*"How else could you explain that (...) representatives for certain family members, when spatially arranged in relation to each other, suddenly feel just the same as the persons they represent, without knowing anything about them beforehand. In this field everybody and everyone resonates with everybody and everyone else."* (Hellinger, 2006, p. 23).

Apparently, the 'knowing field' is used by Hellinger as an explanatory concept. This makes it one of the most controversial elements of his theory. In line with the foregoing we prefer to conceive of it as a metaphor. Indeed, it seems a miracle how people who don't know each other can 'know' what is going on in the life of the client whose constellation is displayed. But postulating a 'knowing field' does not explain much. At the most it suggests some natural order of

human relationships, which legitimises traditional family relationships.

Research into the actual interactions that are going on, into the effects of non-verbal communication, or the process of empathic understanding, into the role of the constellator or phenomena like vicarious emotional arousal, can shed light on what really happens during a constellation. A more academic level of explaining is needed to understand better what is going on in constellations work. This does not do any harm to the sense of wonder or awe of the participants. Moreover, the concept of a 'knowing field' hides an important characteristic of constellations work, which emerges when we look at it from the perspective of meaning of life. Our presupposition is that during constellations work an exchange of moral values and principles takes place. This leads us to propose speaking of the 'moral field' instead of the 'knowing field'. This deserves some clarification.

The 'knowing field' as a central metaphor is based on a more fundamental metaphor: that of spatiality. This resembles Taylor's use of a spatial metaphor for explaining the link between identity and orientation. We find ourselves irrevocably in what Taylor calls a 'moral space' and we are given the task of orienting ourselves in this space, i.e. taking up a position. Taylor holds that spatial orientation lies very deep in the human psyche and is linked with our identity.

*"The disorientation and uncertainty about where one stands as a person seems to spill over into a loss of grip on one's stance in physical space."* (Taylor, 1989, p. 28).

*"Orientation has two aspects; there are two ways that we can fail to have it. I can be ignorant of the lie of the land around me – not knowing the important locations which make it up or how they relate to each other. This ignorance can be cured by a good map. But then I can*

*be lost in another way if I don't know how to place myself on this map.*" (ibid, p. 41).

In family constellations the client and representatives take up positions in physical space. This is the *embodiment* of the spatial metaphor: the client stands for the task *to lay out his moral space in physical space* by positioning representatives (drawing the map) and *to orient himself* in relation to them (placing himself on the map). This may be part of the explanation of the *impact* of constellations work: making identity issues visible intensifies emotions and enables the client to experience relational dynamics in the here and now.

The resulting 'map' represents the client's moral framework. The positions of the representatives will be understood as referring to the hierarchy, conflicts and loyalties of moral values. One can deduce the client's adopted values and their origins from these positions and the interactions of represented family members, so the client is no longer ignorant of the moral map around him. This allows him to consciously choose his stance in his own moral field.

Determining the right position requires authenticity or personal sincerity and at the same time contributes to these qualities. Moral entanglements originate from discrepancies between one's adopted and authentically developed values and the inability to discern or decide. A constellation thus comes down to unveiling unconsciously adopted values and deciding whether these are (still) adequate or should be replaced by authentically developed values.

### Moral topography

In the foregoing we argued that constellations work can be used for uncovering the moral dimension of family dynamics. A focus on authenticity and the meaning of life has consequences for the procedure followed in the constellation. Searching

for meaning in one's own life is a conscious process of orientation which cannot be taken over by someone else. We also do not see the necessity for taking over responsibility from the client. The constellator should primarily take up the role of facilitator in discovering underlying patterns and relational dynamics rather than being the director of the constellation.

Our own values are contained in these statements – that of the need for the client to have free choice and an active participation in designing his own destiny. We would therefore like to propose a shift of focus from 'This is where you are' and 'This is where you should be' to 'What do you stand for?' and 'Who would you like to be?' 'What is a suitable place for you?'

Family constellations work is moral topography. A constellation *literally* shows what people express metaphorically about their relationships to others and it shows the identity issues connected with these relationships. This allows the client to re-orient himself with respect to his convictions and his moral stance: he can reconsider feelings of guilt and loyalty and re-assign responsibilities.

Orientation in the moral field results in a changed outlook on family ties, their nature and hierarchy; in pursuing goals and fulfilment from a position of authenticity instead of being entangled by (hidden) loyalties; in re-defining moral opinions (which were originally acquired from the family) in terms of one's own experiences and needs; in freedom and personal growth as a consequence of a higher level of self-awareness.

#### Note:

*With this article we aspire to contributing to an academic approach to constellations work. We welcome discussion.*

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