



A conversation with Dirk Marivoet about ethics

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Dirk Marivoet is the director of the Institute for Bodymind Integration in Ghent (Belgium). He studied Core-Energetics under John C. Pierrakos, MD; Postural Integration®, Energetic Integration and Pelvic-Heart Integration under Jack Painter, PhD (and has been a certified trainer/supervisor since 1999). He has also worked extensively with native shamanism both in Europe and North America. Earlier in the 80s and 90s he was adjunct faculty Psychomotor Therapy at Leuven University, where he still teaches.

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Relational Implicit* project (<http://relationalimplicit.com>).

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

- Serge: We're having a discussion on ethics. Something we've been thinking about having for a while now. Our exchange is obviously not about what is true, what is correct, but represents our personal opinions and, hopefully, will be stimulating to others in articulating their own positions and opinions.
- Dirk: Yeah. Ethics. It's all about how to have a good life, right, and how to live in a way that feels and that looks like contributing something to a better life not for me as a person but for the whole. We can talk about my family, I can talk about my patients, I can talk about the communities I'm in. Basically, an ethical position for me is to be in tune with nature because that's, in the first place, where we need to be connected with. That's where we come from. That's how we're born. It's from a naked place. Being in the human form, we come into a world that is full of suffering.
- I think the ethical stance that we should all adopt or, at least, that I adopt, is to try to diminish suffering, to raise happiness, and to raise understanding because if you don't come to understanding ... If you're, let's say, ignorant, then it's hard to have a life that becomes meaningful. The acquiring meaning to life is also important, I think, from an ethical position.
- Serge: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I want to articulate, as I'm hearing you, a few things that strike me in terms of ethics as you articulate them as compared to, say, transcendent morals or rigid rules of morals. You're talking about something that comes from inside and where it's guided by an inner sense. You used the word attuned, so an inner sense of feeling attuned to the various constituencies you're part of. There's the earth, there's the larger group of human race, there's your family, and so on and so forth. A sense of navigating and finding a way to be in-tune with the respective needs of these environments and of wanting to have a positive contribution so, therefore, to alleviate suffering and help happiness.

Dirk: Exactly. Yeah, it's about, in the end, a stance where it's not dogma. It's not about the moralistic rules like the idea that, by following rules, that you get to the good life. My belief is that we can support virtues that are natural. I'm thinking of this expression of Albert Camus who said, "If you don't have character, then you need to have a method." "Quand on a pas de caractère, il faut se donner une méthode". With character, he means that we need integrity. For me, integrity is all about one to be in-tune with life but being in-tuned with life has to do with being in-tuned with your body. I'm a bodyworker and a body psychotherapist.

My integrity to experience has grown through the knowledge that comes from the body, the wisdom that comes from the body. When I come to the body, all the, let's say, the good that is meant to be can come out, it can flourish. In that way, it fits with the Greek idea of eudaemonia (best translated as "human flourishing") which is living a life that is not, let's say, only thinking of me egoistically or hedonistically like having only easy pleasure but it's really acknowledging that I'm part of a community, that I'm part of a society, that I'm part of a global network where I have a role and I believe everyone of us has a role.

The work on the virtues really is about... To develop integrity and character is a hard work, in a way, to become more conscious, to become embodied and, from there, to live in accord with another human being who may be disagreeing, who has another approach to life, maybe has another system of ethics, who maybe uses methodology, certain rules, that I may not necessarily agree with so that I can rebel against.

Serge: I want to stop a little bit because, again, what you said is very rich, and I want to highlight some of the things. I want to highlight then by, in a way, starting backwards. That we're not talking about selfish satisfaction but something, the eudaemonia that's going to be something about the satisfaction that comes from doing what works for the larger group as well. It comes from that sense of being part of the larger group as well. You could say, in lots of ways, this is what ethics in general has been preaching, to not be selfish in that restricted way. However, what we're talking about here is very different from the sense of "stop being selfish, which feels good, in order to sacrifice yourself to do something that's going to be good for others and, in a way, the sense of you lose yourself in order to do something that's ethically good."

What we're talking about is something that's much more profound. It's a realignment and it consists in actually coming to understand that that little self, that little ego that feels like I want my satisfaction at the expense of others if you want the psychotic ego, the psychopathic ego, sociopathic ego, is actually doesn't really get it because we get a much bigger sense of fulfillment when we are in-tune with our environment, when we swim like a fish in the water and we're social animal. I think that's what you're talking about is that that satisfaction comes actually from that shift where we realize what the true sources of our fulfillment are.

Dirk: Yeah. I think we are encountering global socio-political problems and that any profession or any meaningful expression of a life needs to be with that in the background, with the society in the background. I think, where we are now with the traditional values or the traditional things that worked or that were held together by religion or by political stability that we're losing this, what the Enlightenment

brought us in the development of our psychology is that we became more and more individuals. But the individualism can become a problem when it's no longer with the background of the traditional community. I think that any minority or that any rebellious voice now coming up in the world is an expression of some part that needs to be considered again because maybe some, let's say, interest, personal interests, also interest of certain groups within society has been not considering the whole natural network. That make sense?

Serge: Yeah. As I'm listening to you, I'm feeling a little frustrated because the conversation is going to another place, which is wonderful and, at the same time, we lost another part that was part of, again, the very rich thing you had started to say before. I'm hesitating whether to go back to that and to go to where you are right now. Maybe to give you a choice in the matter, if we were going back, it would be to go back to that sense of : If ethics come from understanding where we truly are in society, how do we get in touch with that? You were starting to talk about the sense of that bottom-up phenomenon of paying attention to the body. I'm going to see where we want to go. Do we want to go back to that or do we want to continue the train of thought that you started now?

Dirk: I think it ties in with each other.

Serge: Good.

Dirk: In the end, it will come together so we can go back to the embodiment, as we can go back to the larger picture that I was describing now.

Serge: Maybe I would choose to go back to the embodiment because, then, the question in a way where we were before is to say, okay, you know, it's not the traditional, rigid ethics or what you called method of "you have to do this" and "you have to deprive yourself," but you have to open up to that sense of being part of something larger, which is not a mystical concept but is something about really trying to feel it in its absolute concrete way, to see how it's carrying you. You were talking about that sense as coming from the body so you want to elaborate on it a little bit so that people can understand what the experience of it is.

Dirk: First of all, what happens when you come more to the body is that you get closer to yourself basically. You get more close to who you are, who you are as a part of nature. I always feel that that is a strong part of working with the body, that you feel closer to nature. When you feel closer to your own nature, you feel closer to your own, let's say, impulse to connect, impulse to belong to a group, to a society. When I work with people on the level of the body, many times people are so estranged of their own body that they say things like, "What I feel now is very strange." My answer is, "That's very true because, in a way, you have become estranged of what could feel natural."

It has to do with feeling life in your body. It has to do with feeling aliveness, with the sensation of energy that you have more energy in your body, that you feel more power in your body. That, to a lot of people feels strange or also to feel that power or that energy in certain parts of their body that they're not accustomed to. Then, when I imagine people who are more in their body, and who are in contact with nature, they really feel the body ... I would say, to the bone. They have a deep sense of saying yes to the experience of the body.

I think we got in trouble or many people are getting in trouble today because they have this idea that reason needs to guide our life. That some idea, “a how I should live”, is primary. That comes to rules and expectations that comes also from this society, but there's another level in life that comes from a deeper connection. My work is to bring people back to that deeper place of really feeling what is your impulse, what comes out of you as something that you, as an individual, as a unique expression of life want to do. Then, people feel all kinds of things. They want to reach out. They want to express themselves. They want to show themselves in a very particular way. They want to bring their opinion, their idea. What you see when they come from the deep place, from that gut place, from that heart place because that's where they get then, to the bone place that then there are all kinds of 'No's' that come up. There is a no ...

Serge: Let me stop you there for a moment. We'll come back to the 'No'. For a moment, I want to highlight a bit what you said and put it again a slightly different twist as I had been doing. You know, what you're doing and, which in my own experience, my own experience in my work, it's similar to yours, is as helping people get in touch with the body and the bodily felt sense and something that the whole person as opposed to just thought is, at the same time, strange, a little scary but, at the same time, opening up new horizons and new perspectives and is essentially highly creative. What I want to try to do is to, in a way, appeal to logic in order to justify not paying attention to logic.

The appeal to logic here is to see who we are. It's really interesting to see how we came to be who we are where we come from as a species. The whole concept, essentially, of evolution is we started being much simpler creatures... that the super structures, the thinking and so on, and something that's been added much, much later, very recently..., and that, in fact, a lot of our mind is not a thinking machine like a computer and a logical thinker but it's really something that is geared to attaining goals, is to give shortcut answers in order to get goals.

When we construct a primacy of logic and reason, it is totally an illusion. It's a very useful ... We've developed very wonderful, useful tools and we love them but they're not the essence of how we feel who we are and that sense of, deep sense of self. That deep sense of self includes, of course, that physicality of felt sense but also the connection to others because, essentially, if you think of it, we're a social animal so we evolved to have the deep connection to others. What makes us feel good in our skin is that connection to inside, not just ideas and connection to others. Having articulated this, yes, absolutely then we go back to “how do we make use of that “as you were starting to say when I cut you off.

Dirk: I agree totally with what you say. It's very well said. I think it's also Camus who said that we suffer a little bit from “crimes of logic” because when the logic becomes a doctrine and we reason too much, then we get in trouble with these natural impulses. It starts in most people's lives like this, you know ... When you have relationship with your parents, in the relationship with your parents, there is this expectation that because I'm your mother, you should love me. You should love your father because he's your father. This is called syllogisms. There are certain premises that, reasonably, they're correct. It's true. I can say you're my mother so I should be loving you but, of course, the reality of the matter is that my mother is

not behaving always in a way that I am able to love her because I'm rebelling against something so I have this 'No' coming up.

In many places very early on, because we develop this capacity to reason that we are forced to love before we actually have a chance to say no. That's part of our naturality, be able to rebel. Camus, he inspires me. He said, "I rebel, therefore, we exist." If I can express something that's natural that has to do with this, "No, I don't agree." There's a boundary. I feel my integrity is not seen or is not respected. Then, I come in a situation where I want to fight or where I want to simply disagree. The fact then that there's an openness for that, that that can happen, that brings the deeper connection again, that opens the possibility for the "yes", for the integrity that is maintained.

Serge: That's a very, very important part. That, in lots of ways, integrity in a traditional way would be described as the equivalent of rigidity. This is far from that integrity as you described it, far from rigid, would have that quality of moving like water in the sense of adapting to what's right in the moment. It's going to being able to say yes as well as say no. The very, very powerful point you make is if we're never allowed to say no, and the only answer is yes, then the yes is meaningless. We have lost ourselves as well as the value of saying yes and there is no integrity possible. Integrity involves that respect for how we feel and for the choices we make as opposed to, basically, the culture of something being eradicated, of being totally impossible.

Dirk: We get that feeling that sometimes we say it's absurd. That life or situations or socio-political situations are absurd. That has also to do with estrangement that when the dialogue is not maintained on a very personal and a gut level, and a felt-heart level in a small community, then all kinds of rules, all kinds of decisions are made that are far away from the person; that are strange. That creates absurdity, a surrealism. That insight, then the rebel comes in direction, the 'No' comes up. 'No' needs to be expressed in the situation where it's received. Out of my integrity, I can say this is my world too. This place, larger or smaller, is where I need to live my life. The decisions that are made far from me, maybe having such an impact to say "this is absurd". "This cannot be." Then, the natural rebel wakes up. He needs to wake up in order to create a situation where we, at least, do an effort together or to understand together each other.

Serge: That sense of if we don't allow the 'No', then comes that sense of, you described, as something absurd. When you use the word absurd that way, it reminds me of the way in everyday language. We can say all such as boring. Boring seems like it's dull and gray but, actually, boring is actually behind the numbness that the word that boring implies. There is a lot of unexpressed feelings which can be very powerful. In a similar way, when we describe something as, 'This is absurd,' it is actually numbing how much we rebel against it but it's a rebellion that has 'learned helplessness' so we know that rebellion is useless. It's absurd because we can be both rebellious, angry but, at the same time, feeling power-less and desperate.

What you're talking about is a recognition that all of these things that we call absurd, you know, actually are very intense frustration of the arbitrariness of power coming to reach us in a way that feels deeply wounding but that we cannot react against. At the same time, as we're talking and you're talking about, in a way, it's more possible to feel connected with the righteousness of power in a small

environment, in a small tribe than it is in a large society. This relates a lot to what we've been experiencing in all the movements of rebellion and the 'No', the very powerful 'No' that had been expressed to consider them, not necessarily, to share into the results of what people have achieved through them, but to have more of an understanding that actually, in a way, what is being expressed that way is a more general discontent of a lot of people and probably most people, if not all people, in some way, shape, or form having a difficult relationship with the power of the state and trying to manage that relationship.

One way or another, because the essence of it is that it's not really actually something that's functionally pleasant at an individual level, it's going to show up in all kinds of chaotic ways.

Dirk: Exactly. I think, in the larger society and there maybe we need rules, we need a certain deontology also, there's no contradiction, that people need a place where they can say no without the sense of renunciation because, I think, what you refer to is the possibility exist that people are bored numbing themselves which then, of course, is bringing them to an unnatural, unhealthy state, I would say, so the key to integrity and the naturalness, the possibility to say 'no' needs to be expressed but in a way that also takes into consideration the whole. It's not only a protest, it's not only creating a separation or an isolation position but it's on the boundary or on the borderline saying there is a need for mutual understanding. This gives meaning to life. This gives meaning to my life.

If I can express myself and you can understand me, that way we can both see each other's points of view, then we can go on. We can go on to construct positively. We can go on evolving. In that way, we haven't evolved anything maybe and all that we're doing since the early times of humanity is to harmonize this new development still, the rational brain with the rest of our deep intelligence that is a social intelligence.

Serge: Very interesting harmonizing 'intelligence' with social intelligence and in a very practical way what you said a few minutes ago is there is a need for mutual understanding. That's what gives us our lives meaning. The 'intelligence' in a way is, look, I'm going to be smart. I'm going to do what's for my own good. If I pay too much attention to what others need and want, I'm cheating myself, so I'm dumb. The social intelligence is going to go into I will only thrive to the extent that I'm carried by that something larger, that the water is what's needed to be a fish. The groups is what's needed to be a social animal.

It's not one dimension versus another because, in a way, evolutionarily, we have both traits. Both traits have been very useful to bring us to where we are. We're not talking about killing completely something to live only by the other, which is an absurd possibility, but the question of finding the balance between both and finding that balance is, again, something that's not about a rigid rule but is a cultivating that inner sense, that inner compass, of how it feels right to figure out what works for me in a larger context versus me in a small definition of myself.

Dirk: Exactly. The small definition of yourself maybe too isolated from that bigger social environment that you need. The work with the body there, I think, is also very, very helpful because when we talk about the 'No', the rebellion, it can become an idea or a political program, I can start my own political party if I want, but the advantage of

bringing it to the body is that probably there I can really feel the close connection. I don't need to lose my connection with you or with my fellow brother or sister when I have this 'No'.

Serge: I want to highlight this because, you know, as you said, I can start my own party, everybody could do this. This is if we get into a way just the surface of the feeling the ideas of it and then we can go from there. From there, we can make a lot of wind and rev up a lot. When you talk about the body, the point I want to highlight, which is my own experience as well in my work and personal life, is when we talk about the body, we're really not talking about the body as isolated. We're talking about the body as actually that whole physicality of being where we feel our connection, our relationality with others.

What I want to highlight when you keep saying the exploring the 'No' and exploring the 'No' in the body is it's not an isolated thing because, otherwise, it's very easy to make the caricature of somebody saying you know I'm feeling it in their body as being like a spoiled child or being just like a baby who's saying no. Even a baby who's saying no is actually reacting to the environment. That's the body, that physical sensation, the paying attention to it is really paying attention to the place where the interface, where we have consciousness of our relationship with the world. That relationship can be a 'Yes' and an opening but can be a 'No' and a rejecting.

In that sense, being able to feel the 'Yes' as well as the 'No' is really actually having an embodied sense of self because it's how we manage, how we want to be in relationship with the world, how we want to be open to the world, how we want to close, how we're able to open and close at will. There is the perceived experience of self in connection and being in connection does not always mean being totally open but is being able to manage that connection.

Dirk: Yeah. I think when going to the connection with your body ... If life has no meaning, if you don't see clear where you stand, where you go, what's your purpose, what is it you want to say, what is it you want to express, going to the body really brings you to the 'Yes' or the 'No'. It really brings you to the truth of what is happening as a deeper scheme, as a deeper impulse. Allowing that impulse will usually look like a rebellious force because so many times, you know, the mere fact of coming together, of sharing ideas, sharing words, they can always be misunderstood, creates this tension, creates this possibility of, let's say, the loss of integrity, the danger of the loss of integrity that is so primary, that is so essential, that is so dear to us that we will anyhow come to this deep 'No' very soon.

Serge: It's interesting when you put it this way. The 'No' is a no simply because it is in relationship with something that doesn't allow for you to be received with curiosity and interest. If you imagine something that is about 'Hey, I want to hear what you have to say', then there's no reason to say no so the 'No' is actually a reaction to 'I don't want to hear you'. When we hear the 'No', there was actually before it an implicit no that was saying, "No. I don't want to hear what you have to say. I only want to hear what I want to hear." The second no is actually an answer that's making explicit that rebellion against 'I don't want to hear you'.

Dirk: It's a small line between where am I egoistic and where am I really only considering myself and where am I feeling my impulse that wants to connect with you through

the 'No'. Through the 'No', I have the possibility to connect with myself and with the other, with the environment.

Serge: No. That's a part. There are a couple of points. One is there's a fine line. The fine line exists because it's not in the realm of objective, quantifiable, eternal truth but it's in the realm of relationship and, therefore, subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. It is not about it's right or it's wrong but it's actually a process of negotiating. Interaction is negotiation.

Dirk: Yes.

Serge: It's not something where you can hang on to, "Oh, I'm right," or, "I'm not selfish," or, "I'm this or I'm that. " It's what can be maddening is because it's actually a very inter-subjective process.

Dirk: It's all the more maddening probably when it's only words or when it's too abstract, when it's too, let's say, disconnected. The more disconnected from the body also from the testing of the reality through the body, that we come to more flow, to more harmony. It's like with the love. From the mother, I can say I love you when I feel in my body that my mother loves me, that there is a sense that comes to the touch or to the eyes or to a certain touching, to a certain physicality. Then, I can be really sure about the concrete reality, the concrete tangibility of what is there. Can I be whole, can I be entire. Am I seen as whole and entire? That's how I think.

Serge: It's interesting because maybe that might be where we conclude the discussion today. I assume you want to go someplace else. What strikes me is we started the discussion about a sense of ethics and what is ethics and how do we get there. We're coming very strongly on the idea that, you know, how we experience interaction in our body allows us to have our integrity. That integrity is not an abstract quality but is that quality of experience that it feels right. My interaction feels right. This is where I want to be. In a way, a simplified way to come back to the notion of ethics is to say that if you are disconnected from your body or to the extent we are disconnected from our body, then we are ethically challenged. To the extent that we are connected to our body's senses, our felt senses, then we much more likely to be ethical.

Dirk: To repeat what Albert Camus says, if you have character, meaning integrity, then you don't need the rules, you don't need the methods. You simply live right and you are met in the right ways so that you can live right in connection with the other human being, in connection with the other species, in connection with the planet, with the natural world. This ethical position is really a natural ethical position.

Serge: Yeah. What's interesting is in light of the discussion, the phrase of Albert Camus, about the character versus the method, character, again, in everyday conversation can be something that's almost mythical or something you have, by nature, tangible so it becomes something that might be difficult to talk about. You used the phrase before when you were talking about being connected to the body is you used the phrase of testing reality through the body. When we're talking about character in this context, we're talking about experience, we're talking about wisdom acquired through experience, and we're talking about experience that is lived in a mindful way because it's really paying attention to the nature of experience, not the idea of experience, not processed abstractly but processed moment by moment through

that sense of, you know, oh, it feels right, and through that very basic, primitive essential mechanism of how we have consciousness of who we are in the world.

Dirk: It's about consciousness also, yeah. Of course.

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