

BIOETHICS

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Introduction

Ethics deals with what is good or bad. It tries to devise principles of conduct governing individuals and societies. Its actual failure is total. One may guess that the failure is due to the fact that for the last thirty centuries, ethics has been founded on irrational values, such as doctrine, philosophy, faith or revelation. In fact, ethics always failed to consistently modify human behavior. Up to a few decades ago, that ineffectiveness was, however, of little impact on earth and on the living world.

Today, the impact of mankind on bios has become dangerous. Life on earth is probably endangered. A new ethics must be built based on scientific facts, i.e., on the only near-certainty that we have at our disposal. We maintain that the good, the bad and the principles of conduct must be defined as a function of evolution, although our understanding of that phenomenon certainly remains partial. The conduct of man must evolve having as a unique goal the preservation of life which is the product, the main product, of evolution. Yet, in the light of the past evolution, it is by no means sure that this will be possible.

Bioethics

It is highly probable, that within the thirty, forty or fifty years to come, the fate of the earth or, even worse, the fate of life will be played out. Thirty, forty or fifty years are, of course, a very short time, especially in light of evolution, which started, three or four billion years ago. It is just time enough for one or two generations. Let us not forget that there have been eighty generations since the birth of Christ and some 100,000 since the emergence of the badly named Homo sapiens. Now, for the first time, it seems conceivable that the long story will find its end, not in a kind of apocalyptic grand finale, but rather in a kind of suffocating asphyxia.

Twenty or thirty years ago, it seemed not impossible to believe that humankind and all other life on earth could be eventually destroyed in the course of a nuclear war. That danger, of course, still exists and the world stock of nuclear weapons is probably still of such a magnitude that it could kill every living being twenty or thirty times. Yet there is now a kind of worldwide awareness of that terrible danger. It is therefore possible that the fear of an apocalyptic war will be great enough to prevent anybody from starting it. Yet some head of state going crazy is a possibility which cannot be totally discounted and neither can the occurrence of an accidental super-Chernobyl be entirely neglected.

I believe, however, that a nuclear war or nuclear accident are not the major dangers which are threatening us. The dangers which we have to face now are less well-acknowledged than the nuclear threat, less well-known and defined and their consequences poorly perceived. Let us recall briefly that list has now been made and published so many times the main dangers to which I am referring. The huge quantities of carbon dioxide produced by our cars, our dirty factories, our inconsiderate use of fossil fuels; the slowly increasing temperature of the globe; the melting ice fields; the rising level of the oceans; the flooding of one-fifth, one-fourth, one-third of the submerged surfaces; the irreversible vanishing of the last large forest; the destruction of the ozone layer and last, but certainly not least, the mountains of toxic waste which accumulate, as much in developed as in developing countries, dustbins of the industrialized world. A remarkable combination of circumstances which, let us say it once again, seriously endanger bios.

For the last few years, it has definitely been fashionable to discuss, debate and quibble about a new ethics, to evolve so-called new paradigms, to pinpoint the musts of today and tomorrow. My own feeling is that these new paradigms, these ephemeral musts are not essentially different from paradoxes, the half-truths and the half-lies which exist and did exist since Lao-Tse and Confucius, since Socrates, Plato and the Sophists, even since Hammurabi in Babylon, the Vedas in India, in fact since man first asked questions about man. The main difference between tomorrow and yesterday, between our children and grandchildren and our parents and grandparents is extremely superficial, let us say totally unnoticeable. But during the time of man's painstriking advances, his invasion of earth was as patient as it was inescapable, as unseen as it was implacable. The French commandant Cousteau, who has been observing the damaging of our environment for the last forty years, considers the main cause of the disasters of tomorrow to be the totally uncontrolled demographic explosion. One million extra mouths to feed every four days! This is a point to which we shall return.

But what is ethics? Ethics deals with the nature of ultimate values and with the standards by which human actions can be judged to be right or wrong. Ethics strives to know and to claim, and eventually to impose, what man should do. I guess its actual failure is total. Ethics, I believe, is like philosophy. There is no single civilization which ever came to a consensus. Note that I am saying civilization and not moral, religion, philosophy, faith, revelation or whatever may be considered metaphysical. Ethics has never been a matter of factual knowledge. It appears to

me that it was never bound to knowledge, to scientific quasi-certainties, the only quasi-certainties which transcend both space and time. Everybody agrees about the freezing point of water, the atomic weight of helium or the structure of DNA. But nobody seems to know what the Good, the Beautiful, the This-is-to-be-done is. There are some statements, there are some claims about what beautiful or good is, but these claims are subjective, transient, individual and powerless; they are accepted only by those who belong to the claiming, but not substantiating, school of thought.

For the last twenty or thirty centuries, ethics was based on a number of values, rational, irrational or rationalized but whose main feature was to be linked to temporal values, fluctuating both in space and in time. In any case, during that long period of time, and even if these values were influencing human behavior to a certain extent, I am not sure that they were of any influence on the evolution of life on earth. Indeed for centuries man has been fighting, destroying, killing, grubbing, traveling and invading the whole planet. Yet the planet was so large and the human population so modest a size that the earth could not be modified or disturbed to a significant extent. But man alas is the species. At the beginning, man appeared extremely weak, totally defenseless in the competition with apparently better armed species. Yet he became and is today the absolute invader. From the commencement of life he became its ultimate parasite. The egocentric behavior of man but are all living beings not egocentric now has a paramount impact on earth. Rare, as the species was, man is now plethoric. Man, product of evolution! The questions then are: Is evolution purposeful? Is evolution blind, simply depending on a frivolous DNA which obeys only its own logic, made of randomness and necessity de hasard et de necessit  as said by Jacques Monod? Has evolution been terminated, because man has escaped the forces of natural selection, especially in the more advanced countries of the world the ones responsible for most of the damage to bios because he has freed himself from evolutionary forces which regulate other species.

Is it not time, finally, to stick to knowledge, to quasi-certainties? Let us try to consider that ethics only makes sense in light of evolution. Evolution which started in the midst of the great prebiotic soup and went on from worms to fish, reptiles, birds, mammals, primates and up to man. Evolution which, I feel, gives the impression that the distinction between North and South, between rich and poor, between black, white and yellow, between well-to-do and damned six hundred and fifty million on the one side, four billion and a bit on the other has no sense, except the sense of decadence, death, vanishing of the species, evanescence of bios.

One may admit that ethics has no other purpose than the survival of man, and with man of all the forms of life. I sometimes feel that the ethical problems which are debated at length today on the radio, on the TV, in the newspapers and in magazines, viz. substitute mothers, the therapeutic fierceness, euthanasia, genetic engineering applied to man, abortion, and so on, are in fact without great importance if one considers not what happens among the happy few, but in the poor world. These so-called ethical problems are problems of the spoiled rich brat. The main ethical problem results from two facts, namely that on the one hand six hundred and fifty million people in Western Europe, North America, Japan, Australia are living badly, very badly, and that, on the other hand, there are almost five billion people whose only problem is to try to survive.

When I say that there are six hundred and fifty million people who live badly it is to be understood in the light of evolution. There is in that assertion no reference to Yahweh, Buddha or Allah. There is no speculation on the platonic idea of the possibility of knowledge of an objective form or idea of goodness. There is no speculation about the antithetic claims of the sophists pretending that goodness and justice are relative to the customs of each society or, worse still, merely a disguise for the interest of the stronger. Incidentally, are we today a bit further out of the woods than the Greeks were twenty-five centuries ago? And furthermore, even if goodness were objectively definable, does this answer the question of the reasons that we must or mustn't do what is good any better than the Greeks?

The primary object is to discern how the six hundred and fifty million jeopardize life. This is something which can be measured, weighed, quantified. The main thing is to realise that it is bad and wrong to believe or to pretend to believe that the others, the almost five billion, will someday be able to live, to waste and to wreck as we do. The main issue is to see that in the light of evolution all the facts cling together, that there is a single man, a single species, a single life and that if I wish to save myself and if we wish to save the six hundred and fifty million, well, the others may also need to be saved.

An example of that interdependence was given at this tribune in October, 1988 by J.E. Carroll. He showed very clearly why the Amazon forest was so rapidly and irreversibly destroyed. The main reason is that Brazil needs hard currency to pay off its debt. Therefore, soya is planted to an enormous extent in the deforested parts of the Amazon forests. The access of that almost unapproachable part of the world was made feasible by huge works financed by the International Monetary Fund otherwise known as the World Bank, which wished to see its own money as well as the money of its brother-bankers again. Soya is mainly used to produce pork in huge feedlots and at a cheap price in the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark and so on. This constitutes a remarkable example of symbiosis between the United States, which tries to recuperate its dollars, Brazil, which destroys the Amazon forest, and Western Europe, which contaminates its soils and slurry waters and breaks up traditional agricultural structures hog factories vs. classical pork producers.

In the light of the evolution, bios should be considered as a whole. All living beings, from fly to man, should be considered as equal products of an identical phenomenon and consequently should be treated in the same respect. Of course, today, this is absolutely untrue. Plant and animal species disappear because of the human demography at a rate which probably has no precedent. Sixty to eighty percent of the natural resources are consumed by less than twenty percent of the world population. All forecasts tell us that in the near future let's say up to the year 2025 the de facto situation will not improve, only deteriorate. Is it admissible?

Thus far, I have considered evolution from a point of view which one may call anthropomorphic. In fact, evolution can be viewed from two diametrically different points of view. The first one, which I took into account up to now, considers evolution as a nice, well-ordered phenomenon leading bios from chaos to an absolute godsend called man. In that light, man is considered as the pre-seen endpoint of evolution, which started in the grand prebiotic soup and culminated in perfection. Man has duties towards the other products of evolution which are still existing and which all contributed to the great chain of life. The main points here are that evolution was purposeful and that man is a responsible end-product.

Another way of looking at evolution is to consider that it is nothing else than a gigantic failure and that the present state of bios is nothing else than a transient state of an enormous play of trials and errors. It is generally deemed that the approximately 1.5 million species living today only represent one percent of all the species which have ever lived on Earth. In other words, it may be claimed that the reality of evolution is not that which survives, but that which disappears. One may add that nobody really knows how a species appears, expands and persists, or appears, expands, declines and vanishes. There have been almost one hundred theories about the extinction of the large reptiles during the Secondary Era.

From the second point of view of what evolution is, there follows a very pessimistic view on how the future of the others may be worked out. One may easily defend the idea that the vanishing of the others, or at least their decadence, their survival in subhuman conditions or their actual phenotype, is simply written either in their genes or if one admits something which could be true that their genes are not essentially different from ours or, in the poor quality of their genotypes in relation to the actual world environment.

A genotype is often considered as the sum of the genes of a living being, of all living beings. In all plant or animal species, excluding man, the genotype, the information which allows life, is the product of evolution, which acts on genes only. In man, a threshold, evolution is not simply the gesture of DNA sequences; importantly, a part of human evolution, the new dimension of human evolution, is cultural evolution. Today one may claim that the actual human genotype is the sum of his transmissible DNA-contained information and of his transmissible cultural-contained information. A small part of the human species the leading world has freed itself from evolutionary forces which regulate other species. Inadequacy of the global human genotype genes and culture and of the actual leading world environment may explain why there is a Third World. Millions of species, sub-species, races and populations what are the exact differences between these notions? Millions of them vanished. Why not the others?

Forecasters tell us that in the year 2025 there will be ten to twelve billion human beings on the planet Earth. They also tell us that the disparities between the rich and the others will grow. Evolution will essentially be identical to what the honest observer a very small number of people gazed at for the last fifty years. And this notwithstanding the fine words of the rich who stupidly pretend that someday everybody in the World, like in the United States and in a few other places in the world, will suffer from the cold in the summer and from the heat in the winter. That is, of course, civilization and air-conditioning.

So what now? Apocalypse for ninety percent of the world within the next thirty years? Or everybody put on short rations? The last solution would be reasonable! But could that be our choice and decision? In other words: is evolution reasonable? Is it, more simply, so easily unverified and unverifiable? Can it no more affect the leading world which believes to be the master of its destiny until the moment of suffocating asphyxia?

References

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