

BIOPOLITICS IN THE LIGHT OF BIO-ETHICS

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It seems that it has been a long time since humans became the dominant species on earth. It has also been widely recognized that humankind has been the most effective environment modifier, possibly in the whole course of evolution on this planet and consequently the source of the recent and real threat to the survival of the overall biosphere.

It may not seem likely that humanity will face extinction in the foreseeable future, but it appears to be certain that given our evolutionary development so far, we are going to have even greater problems concerning our relationship with the environment.

Is there any solution to this state of affairs? Not that a species could evolve without having any problems in relation to its environment as a whole, but the problems may sometimes become 'evolutionary' and almost insurmountable.

The problems created by people in relation to the world are threefold:

- the high rate of increase in the population;
- the ever-increasing consumption of nature; and
- the deterioration of the environment.

Obviously, these are interrelated. First, more individuals means more human molecules, as a rule, at the expense of those of other species. That is to say, the overall non-human biosphere. Secondly, the natural environment consumed by humans, non-living as well as living, is evidently not limitless. And thirdly, the high degree of technology and industrialization, an outcome of the advanced tool-making capacity of the human animal, leads to the production of new substances which have not evolved naturally artifacts that cannot be processed and assimilated by nature at a corresponding rate to their current production. What these three major aspects of the human-nature relationship signify, is an inevitable vicious circle of an ever-narrowing natural environment, both living and non-living.

What I intend to present in this context is a conceptual treatment of certain key terms with regard to the human-nature relationship. As you would certainly expect, I can only give you an account of the concept of Biopolitics as it was originally developed by Dr. Agni Vlavianos-Arvanitis, apparently along with other terms beginning with the prefix bio-, such as bio-environment, bio-education, bio-diplomacy, etc. And as you are all in a position to know, again, bios has been the favorite term of the Biopolitics International Organisation as a synonym for life.

We learn from one of its publications that "in an effort to bridge the gap between technological progress and societal values, the Biopolitics International Organisation proposes the 'Bios Theory' by promoting the implementation of ...international cooperation for the better understanding of bios; promoting the development of international legislation on 'Bios Rights'; the bio-assessment of technology, namely ...a dialectic approach in examining potential perspectives in all fields of human endeavour in an effort to improve the quality of life;...the sensitization of public opinion towards the ramifications of the biological sciences, and the impact this progress may have on other fields of study; and the...development of curriculum materials for elementary, middle and higher levels of education."¹

In another publication, we find a chart of the Organisation with a title, 'Bios in the Next Millennium' and with such topics related to bios at the center as politics, environment, education, philosophy, ethics, law, history, mythos, architecture, diplomacy, science and technology, health, energy, economics, communications, etc.²

What all the above and similar points imply, is that, in the absence of an explicit definition of the term biopolitics, what is called the Bios Theory suggests a general and rather non-technical sense of the term theory. If we are not misled by a lack of further information of this concept or the main preoccupation of the B.I.O., what is meant here is not a conceptual construction an axiomatic system formulated with a view explaining the facts of the world at a certain level of organization, as the term theory, as a rule, implies in the philosophy of science. What the term seems to mean in our context is the study of the relationship of the human community as a whole with the natural environment in an overall space-time setting. The intention is, from the very beginning, pragmatic, in a vitally significant and comprehensive sense of the term, though, and not directly intellectual or mental, as would be in a case of purely scientific endeavor.

All in all, the Bios Theory strongly implies the involvement of all the basic human activities (science, technology, law, philosophy, education, cooperation, communication) so far as the overall quality of life, including human life, is concerned.

One of the publications of the Biopolitics International Organisation mentioned above is a large volume which contains two sections entitled 'The Philosophical Quest' and 'The Quest for Bio-ethics'. One of the contributions in the latter could obviously be of interest to use, as is its title, Bio-Ethics³, would suggest. The author's main concern is basically scientific-informative and axiological-bio-ethical, and as our own purpose here is essentially conceptual, I shall not refer to it as a resource text in this context.

Apparently, the term bio-ethics was first used, about twenty years ago, by a professor of oncology in the United States, B.R. Potter. It was the title of a book by him, with a subtitle, Bridge to the Future. He dedicated his book to the memory of A. Leopold, "who anticipated the extension of ethics to bio-ethics." We are told on the dedication page that the first ethics dealt with the relation between individuals, later accretions with the relationship between the individual and society. But land still being property, there is as yet no ethic dealing with mankind's relation to it and to the animals and plants which grow upon it. As the land-relation is strictly economic, it entails privileges, but not obligations. In the author's view, the extension of ethics to this element in the human environment is an evolutionary possibility and ecological necessity.⁴

In the preface of his work, Professor Potter mentions the two cultures that seem unable to speak to each other, that is science and humanities, and the possibility of building a bridge to the future by building the discipline of bio-ethics as a bridge between the two cultures. He points out, quite relevantly in our context, that ethical values cannot be separated from biological facts. We are in great need of a land ethic, a wildlife ethic, a population ethic, a consumption ethic, an international ethic, and all of these call for actions based on values and biological facts. "All of them involve bio-ethics, and survival of the total ecosystem is the test of the value system. In this perspective, the phrase, 'survival of the fittest' is simplistic and parochial."⁴

The mention of certain chapter headings in this work could give us an idea about the approach or the philosophy underlying it: 'Bio-Ethics', 'The Science of Survival', 'Teilhard de Chardin and the Concept of Purpose', 'The Role of Disorder in Human Activity and Thought', 'How is an Optimum Environment Defined?', and 'Survival as a Goal for Wisdom'. Considered together and generally speaking, the book includes topics that are, in our view, rather difficult to assemble from a methodological viewpoint. What matters for us in this context are the semantics of the term bio-ethics as it is possibly presented in literature for the first time. In the light of a methodological-semantic evaluation, we observe that the term bio-ethics expresses in a mixed, if not confused, way the facts of the world, which constitute the subject matter of science, and our values, which can also be studied by science, but which are basically different from facts, conceptually and as far as their content is concerned. Although the two realms are interrelated, particularly because the latter depends on or supersedes the former, they are not similar and thus cannot be put into the same set as entities.

Since the very beginning of its coinage, the term bio-ethics has come to mean different things to different users. In its narrowest sense, bio-ethics means an academic field devoted to the study of ethical issues or value problems arising from the contemporary scientific-technical developments in biomedical activity, at the levels of both basic science and clinical application. We find this stated quite explicitly in a modern dictionary.^{5a} The term biomedical ethics is also used as an equivalent in this context. Secondly, the field of bio-ethics comprises not only the moral issues of clinical, medical practice and biomedical research on living systems, but also those studied under such titles as research ethics, health ethics, resource allocation, and others that arise in biomedical activity as a whole. In this case, the term is used to denote a field in which "the effective and established practices in life sciences are studied from the point of view of their ethical risks and their impact on society."^{5b} The scope in such a conception of bio-ethics covers what was traditionally known as medical ethics, but evidently goes beyond its limits.

In the third instance, in addition to the points mentioned above, the term bio-ethics has come to signify a field in which our responsibilities are considered, not only to animals which are exploited in medical research and routine, but also to those used in other areas of scientific and technical endeavor. Fourth, however extensively the scope of the activities in question may be conceived, and beyond the limits of medicine and the sciences, bio-ethics has become the study of our responsibilities in the face of moral issues arising from our various relations with all other species and our responsibilities toward life as a whole. In this sense, the term assumes a scope rather similar to what is meant by environmental or ecological ethics. It may be interesting to mention in this context the term human bio-ethics, the name of an academic center at Monash University in Australia. This distinction dialectically implies the two terms just given. Lastly, bio-ethics has come to mean the study of professional ethics,⁶ possibly with special emphasis on certain activities such as science, medicine, law, journalism, etc.

In any case, and as emphasized by the two editors of the international journal of Bio-Ethics (from the above mentioned center), the field of bio-ethics is an interdisciplinary area^{7a} with contributions from philosophy, medicine, and other health professions, law, sociology, economics, education, and the related fields.^{7b} They also say that they do not wish to restrict their journal to a narrowly philosophical conception of bio-ethics.^{7a}

Given such connotations of an ever-widening scope, it cannot be predicted whether bio-ethics can be equated, in the long run, with ethics as the philosophy of values. As we have tried to show, the five different scopes of the conception of bio-ethics do intersect. However, they are not representable in concentric circles, but rather in the form of three-dimensional figures intersecting in complex and different ways.

Obviously, time will show what further path the semantic development of the concept of bio-ethics, as a process, will follow in the future.

According to Bertrand Russell, the motives that have led men to the investigation of philosophical questions can be divided, broadly speaking, into two groups which are often antagonistic and which have led to very divergent systems: motives derived from religion and ethics, and those derived from science. The interests of Plato, Spinoza, and Hegel are mainly of the former kind, while those of Leibniz, Locke, and Hume are of the latter sort. In Aristotle, Descartes, Berkeley, and Kant, we find both groups of motives strongly represented.⁸

Russell could suitably be considered in the second category together with Locke and Hume, since, in his overall philosophical activity, he is more concerned with the understanding and explanation of the world and human thinking (through 'epistemology') than with moral issues, at least when using the latter term in its direct sense. However, his work *Human Society, Ethics and Politics* could be of real interest to use here.⁹ Among its chapters are those describing and defining the basics and branches of ethics in this realm. The chapter 'From Ethics to Politics',⁹ relates the sentiments with which I most agree:

"The somewhat abstract ethical considerations with which we have been concerned in preceding chapters might make it seem, if put before a person ignorant of human history, as if the road to universal contentment were easy and obvious. It is only necessary that the desires actuating the conduct of individuals and groups should be possible desires and not such as, by their very nature, involve the thwarting of other..Men's desires are not an immutable datum. They are affected by circumstances and education and opportunity..."

In the following paragraph, Russell points out the limits created by reality in this matter:

"But in the real world things are very different from this. The springs of action, as they are found in history and in the present day, are very largely such as demand defeat for others. There is love of power, there is rivalry, there is hate, and, I am afraid we must add, a positive pleasure in the spectacle of suffering..."

And later on he adds:

"Such considerations make the application of ethics to politics difficult so difficult as to seem at times almost futile. But we have reached a moment in human history in which, for the first time, the mere continued existence of the human race has come to depend on the extent to which human beings can learn to be swayed by ethical considerations..."

Politics, as seen in the broader light of ethics or philosophy of values, becomes a differentiated extension of the main field in the realms of socio-economic order, the state and its relations, the individual and society, and similar areas of human attitude and conduct.

Russell's remarks on the relation of politics to ethics are equally valid in the case of the relationship between biopolitics and bio-ethics. In relations with the non-human biosphere, the human species appears to have been basically selfish, inconsiderate, thoughtless, and often cruel. The educational activity in the field of biopolitics and bio-ethics should certainly be devoted to the sensitization towards individuals of other species, and to the inculcation of awareness and consciousness. In the latter cases, humans should have a moral responsibility, and from a pragmatic viewpoint, the human race may quite possibly be doomed to extinction in the not so distant future. Evidently, such an outcome will have escaped from his destruction.

In earlier sections, I have been rather concerned with the conceptual aspects of biopolitics and bio-ethics. Parallel to the relation between ethics and politics, a point to be added here could be that the former concept can be regarded as a special or even specific, differentiated extension of politics into one's relation with bios. The latter must be seen, particularly for our discourse here, as a similar extension of ethics as regards the same realm.

As long as the aspect or component of bio-ethics is concerned, and particularly from the standpoint of education in this area, sensitization and consciousness should be stressed. Empathy would certainly be quite relevant in this context. Self-identification with the value object would be another way of expressing the close sympathy that should be felt towards bios.

The point that really matters here, is our consideration that bio-education is the ethically relevant object.² The object of value must be the bios as a whole. Respect for life and animal rights should be the top bio-ethical principles in such a context and in the light of the related approach.

There are always opinions in opposition to such thoughts and practices. However, the Biopolitics International Organisation strongly supports this concept and feels that it should be directed at younger generations. In considering education, with such purposes as encouragement of moral growth and the development of the capacity for critical intelligence in both the individual and the community, there is a pressing need to elevate the standards of taste and appreciation as well.¹⁰ Lastly, considering the emphasis on ethics, intellectual satisfaction, and aesthetic interests in relation with bios, to miss these would certainly mean a great loss to human potential.

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