

The Ethics of Human Survival
Some Personal Reflections

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The centrality of the ethical challenge that now confronts humankind is becoming increasingly apparent. There have been disparate efforts to grapple with the social and ethical implications of the advances in science and technology (e.g., the search for a non-violent science or questions raised by bio-ethics), with those stemming from environmental concerns, or rapid social change. There are, of course, the agonizing dilemmas of choice between war and peace. Violence has become the primary tool to redress or to maintain social injustice. The pain of unprecedentedly rapid and profound change leaves many bewildered and all too ready to lash out at imagined foes.

This change lends an entirely new dimension to our problems. It is due in part to advances in science and technology. It is also due to the fact that the weak and powerless no longer accept poverty and injustice, a very fundamental value change on their part. It is further due to the incapacity of the nation-state to deal with today's problems - and at a moment when we possess the frightening ability to destroy ourselves.

New sorts of ethical dilemmas are posed not only by advances in biotechnology, genetic engineering and cellular biology, but also by population pressures on the earth's resources and fellow human beings. It seems that concerns of this scale have begun to escape the religious precepts and ethical norms by which humankind has lived over the centuries. "Thou shalt not kill" loses much of its meaning in a world where violence has become not only the last, but increasingly the first recourse when confronted with seemingly intractable problems. Against the scale and structural character of poverty, charity is simply not enough. Ways must be found to relate these basic precepts to the scale and complexity of interconnected problems in the modern world.

There are additional dimensions to our current problems. One such is a transgenerational one; never before have we had to weigh so heavily the consequences of present acts on future generations and societies. Another is a global dimension; decisions reached on one side of the globe can very quickly impact, for good or evil, on the other side. These dimensions of space and time raise basic new ethical questions.

In another problem area, we need to think in different ways about work. In the North, technological advances are breeding structural unemployment, especially among the young. In the South, the concern is rather with the

sheer increase in the jobless, with hundreds of millions of the young entering the labour market every year without real prospects for jobs. We are forced to think about new concepts of work, new ways of organizing our lives, production and social service systems, and new means of intertwining the cycles of work, learning and leisure.

A linked concern is increased longevity and how people will spend their extra years. An 80-year life span implies some 200,000 additional hours of time. Ways have to be devised - economically, culturally and aesthetically - by which this time can be utilized meaningfully, individually and collectively.

There has been a vast increase in human power to create, to liberate, to control, to manipulate, and to destroy. There has not been, however, a corresponding increase in understanding or empathy. This has, among others, led to the depersonalization and dehumanization spawned by huge, unfeeling bureaucracies. This has on the other hand also set off a search for a more human scale in handling social problems. We see more concentration on local community matters and a retreat to ethnic, communal or tribal loyalties.

Unfortunately, most of our efforts to come to ethical terms with our complex world are badly fragmented. What is needed is an encompassing framework, or more precisely frameworks, that would link up the present efforts in a more coherent fashion. What we should be centrally concerned with is mounting a multivaried search for an "ethics of human survival", for ethical systems that are relevant to the crowded, confused, hungry, rapidly changing and interdependent world in which we live.

This should be capable of dealing with the extension of the concept of loyalty beyond its traditional limits to one embracing the notion of a single human species sharing the same planet. It will also have to deal with the question of responsibility and the quest for a new set of balances between the rights and duties of the individual and those of the family, the community and larger social units, and also between unity and diversity.

Adding to our difficulties is the fact that, despite the knowledge explosion caused by science and technology, the data we have bearing on the survival of humankind are still contradictory; much of the knowledge we have gained has not added to our capacity to resolve our problems. The manner in which the various academic disciplines approach the search for new knowledge, with appropriate stress on precision and methodological rigour, has unfortunately often narrowed the horizon to the point of fragmentation of our knowledge and perceptions. Hence their difficulty in trying to comprehend the full complexity of the world in which we live. Virtually all our concerns are compounded by their interconnectedness; we have become much more aware of this recently. The increased level of complexity adds to the uncertainty and difficulty of fully interpreting the scientific data turned up by research and even of making them more understandable.

The mind-numbing scale and complexity of contemporary problems has helped impel the flight into simplistic ideologies and reactionary

fundamentalism as well as the fragmentation of concerns and the proliferation of single-issue politics. It has also brought us to a near suspension - and in some cases - paralysis of our capacity for moral judgement. In its stead we see the emergence of moral relativity and situational morality both equally incapable of addressing the terrifying interconnected dilemmas that we now face.

The materialistic level at which present-day political leaders and decision-makers of various ideologies look for solutions is essentially a dead-end street. What is needed, is a revitalization of the awareness of the moral dimensions of both our problems and their solutions.

While it is important to engage scientists, scholars from the social sciences and humanities along with artists in this search, it will be equally necessary that they do not do so in narrow disciplinary alleys but rather approach their task together. It is also important to involve philosophers and mystics. What is called for really is a resuscitation of moral philosophy which has been so much eroded by the evolution of modern philosophy and science.

The problem that we face and the ethical dilemmas that they cast up cannot be dealt with only at the cognitive level. To be sure, intellectual understanding is an essential ingredient, but it alone is not adequate. The mystics have an equally important contribution to make to this quest for an ethos of human survival. The kind of strong sense of values and ethical commitments that the future will require of each and all of us may have to come from the revitalization of the moral dimensions of human existence and our awareness of the transcendental significance of that existence and its moral implications.

The search that needs to be organized will require interactions between many cultures and religious concepts and it will not be easy. This will have liturgical and doctrinal implications and it will affect symbolic images and metaphors connected with religions which constitute the foundation of so many of our cultures.

As the various major religions come into contact with cultures other than that from which they sprang, their adaptation to such non-Western, non-Arab, peripheral cultures will require not only the removal of the encrustations and intrusions of these earlier cultures from the historical manifestations of these religions. It will also be necessary to reach down to the deepest socio-religious levels in which the basic presuppositions of these cultures are rooted. Concentration on the former could only lead to the emergence of what an Asian Protestant theologian once described as a "homeless theology." It is only from the identification of these religions with the sufferings and the problems of the people within these cultures that a revitalized, culturally rooted and relevant theology could emerge. This also opens the way, however, to being swept up in the political convulsions of the day.

Greater identification with other cultures through emphasis on adoption and adjustment of traditional rites and customs, runs the inevitable risk of

getting mired in the traditional superstitions and magical practices indigenous to these cultures. Here it will not only be a stress on doctrinal purity that will prevent the dissipation of the specificity of these great religions; also needed will be the stimulation and transformation of the awareness of the transcendental significance of life and the deep yearning for that transcendental experience within these autochthonous cultures, so far only manifested in these magical practices, that will lift it from the level of magic to that of mysticism.

This pursuit of the mystical will have many pitfalls and the history of religious wars shows us some of the dangers here:

One is that insight from mystical illumination does not translate easily into human language or specific social action. Language can be inadequate to grasp the import of the insights. Confronted with this ecstatic experience, the human mind can only stammer - or, at best, write poetry.

A second pitfall looms in the personal nature of insights drawn from mystical experience. It is frequently in disjunction with the problems of the modern world - which demand both moral and historical understanding. There is often conflict between the ultimate reality glimpsed through the mystical experience and the historical world. The mystical experience usually cuts squarely across the temporal unfolding of human events that we call history. Efforts to enlist mysticism into the search for spiritual guidance therefore raise the question of the relationship between history and faith.

All religions will have to cope with this particular disjunction. A true sensitivity to the many moral dilemmas we now face just might possibly be achieved through successful efforts to cope with this particular anomaly in the human condition.

Difficult as it is, we must find ways in which the philosopher and the mystic can relate to one another as an essential condition to that strengthening of life affirmative insights that can arise from the wellsprings of religious experience.

The grace that allows the leap into the realm of mystical illumination is not for everyone, of course. We need, therefore, to consider dealing with some of our problems at a more mundane level. To take one example: the contraction of personal space due to greater population density and urban concentration. If there is any hope of preserving the humane elements of human civilization under such conditions, it will probably require the extension and deepening of a sense of inner space through religious experience, through the perception of beauty and - maybe, simply through preservation, of a sense of humour.

There is an additional component in the present human predicament that we can no longer afford to ignore - the prevalence of fear. Fear traps the superpowers in the mutuality of the escalating arms race. Fear of social change makes the privileged resort to violence. Fear about the deepening of

their misery turns the poor and the weak to violence. In a curious way, the loss of faith in a life hereafter has exacerbated the insistence on immediate social justice and the resort to violence as the only means left to achieve it. We must find ways to live with our vulnerabilities and to manage our fears while constantly working to alleviate their causes.

The world's major religions, I believe, could have a major role to play in helping humankind to live with fear and find that sense of inner security that comes from faith - including offer of some form of support to those no longer guided by religious faith. Despite the tragic record of religious wars, all of the major faiths, at their best moments, have displayed a willingness to offer freely the hand, the head and the heart - the indispensable elements in human understanding and compassion. In the past, religions have paid attention largely to individual salvation. Now, however, they need to try to imbue efforts to respond to the present world situation with a sense of humanity, dignity and respect for one's fellow human beings.

The current world situation and the growing awareness of the utter complexity of the problems we face, as well as the need to translate a sense of transcendental significance of life into our patterns of living and the choices we have to make, force us to re-examine the elementary metaphors that we have used to relate to the world and to our fellow human beings. We need to establish new, more relevant structures of meaning by illuminating the boundaries between the sacred and the profane.

The great effort at synthesis and integration of conflicting values that is now required will have little chance of success unless and until humans become capable of overcoming the fragmentation of their own perception of themselves. It is a fragmentation that has resulted, in an ironic way, from the advances of science and its research into both the human body and mind. However useful the insights gained, the process has also contributed to the much larger problem of the present human predicament. What is required is a new assertiveness in efforts to reintegrate the human being's perception of his own humanity.

Science first sprang from the human desire to know the workings of God's universe. But over the centuries, science and religion became separated. We now need to make new, deliberate linkages between scientific pursuit and spirituality.

We are so close to the point where the slide into self-destruction could become irreversible. We have recently learned of the threat of a "nuclear winter" in the aftermath of thermonuclear attack. There is also the growing threat of militarization of outer space. The dominance of the superpowers in space could cause all other nations to lose their autonomy because of the superpowers' unlimited capacity for surveillance and interdiction. The possibility of societal collapse of third world countries is very great. The hour is late and there is great urgency for us to act.

Clearly, it seems what is needed is a multiple range of activities in approaching the problems. We must try to widen and accelerate, and where necessary set in motion, the process of ethical reflection throughout the human community. Even though that process may be a slow one, we must start now.

The dialogue needed might start between spokesmen of the major religions. But it must be further stimulated by the perceptions of non-religious ethical systems. We will also have to listen to the suppressed voices, the often disjointed expressions of popular sects trying to reach for new meaning of life in their struggle against poverty and repression. We should try to develop a greater willingness to listen to these voices - as inarticulate and disturbing they may be - and integrate them into the broader search.

This will mean enlarging our capacity for empathy - at the very moment when everything works against it: the confusion that is abroad, the encroaching limits on life opportunities, the prevalence of privatism in a crowded, competitive world.

Religious institutions used to teach children to empathize with others within their faith who come from different cultures. But these institutions have lost much credibility and vigour. They could, however, be of possible use in helping people to reach out in tolerance and empathy to other faiths and it might be worth while to try to revivify and re-stimulate some of these institutions to make them more relevant to the concerns of the modern world.

To launch successfully the process of ethical reflection that is necessary, we need to have a clearer perception of the central issues as well as better understanding of how these issues might be broached. It might be that through some sort of dialogue with religious leaders and thinkers, these points may become clearer.

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