

Ethics, the Renaissance

Introduction

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TO FOLLOW THE FATE of ethics in the modern Western world, take a trip to the library of Amherst College. If you open the 1895 catalog of courses, you will discover that **ethics** held an honored primacy in the curriculum. The entire first page of the “Course of Study” is devoted to the course on ethics. It was taught by the president of the college (!) to seniors, and you can see by the grand prose used in describing the course that it was enshrined as the capstone of the entire educational process: “The aim of the course is by

the philosophic study of the social and political relations of the individual to his fellow citizens and to the State, to promote that moral thoughtfulness . . . which is the strongest element in true patriotism.”¹

In the thinking of that time, no one who was not sophisticated in moral-value questions could wear the cap and gown. This was faithful to a long tradition. Probing the mysteries and intricacies of **morality** was long seen as the supreme challenge for the giants of genius. Arthur Schopenhauer

wrote in 1848 that “all philosophers in every age and land have blunted their wits on the question of the moral.”² So the 1895 Amherst catalog was heir to a distinguished tradition.

But wait! Back to Amherst we go. By 1905, just ten years later, ethics had been dethroned from its front-page billing and was relegated to the nether regions of the catalog as an elective for sophomores . . . and thus even lowly sophomores could avoid it.

Ethics, Science, and Values

Ethics is simply defined as the study of what is good or bad for people and for the rest of nature. The unseating of ethics was not just limited to this one venerable college in Massachusetts. This revolution and denigration of the study of ethics was the symptom of a cultural pandemic in which moral evaluation yielded place to an intoxicated trust in science as savior. As science and social science were unearthing greater and more intractable moral-value questions, the systematic study of values (i.e., ethics) was moving into oblivion. A chimeric quest for **value-free objectivity** opened the door to a world where upstart cleverness thrived and wisdom waned.³

Science and “Scientism”

Poor ethics. Even those who stubbornly plied this path took to calling their books something like *The Science of Ethics* in a brave effort to be taken seriously. The devil here, of course, is not science. Science is a noble enterprise of human genius that gives us gifts of comfort, ease, and longevity that would make the Caesars of ancient Rome green with envy. **Scientism** is the culprit. “-ism” is a nasty suffix. *Legal*, for example, is a wholesome word, referring to the conscientious effort to sort out the conflicts and possibilities of life in a fair

way. *Legalism*, however, would signal a deterioration into needless bickering and nitpicking.

So, too, *scientism* is the freighting of science with burdens it cannot bear and should not try to carry. Science is strong on whats and hows, but weak on whys and oughts. Science gives awesome powers, but it does not tell how to use them or whether they should be used at all. An ethics that humbly and sensitively searches out the whys and oughts of our gargantuan talents is the natural spouse of science. When the two are divorced, the separation is bloody. Take a look at the record of this fatal estrangement.

It has been said that the prodigious powers of science have created the end of the world and stored it in our nuclear silos while stuffing our soils and foodstuffs with a hundred thousand chemicals. Most of these chemicals have not been tested for safety, and it is estimated that as many as half of them are toxic to humans.⁴ As we are out jogging for health, the groundwaters below may contain the ingredients of our bodily undoing. Human breast milk often contains more toxins than are permissible in milk sold by dairies. And take note! Toxins are so ubiquitous and permeating that some are even permitted by dairies. Human bodies at death often contain enough toxins and metals to be classified as hazardous waste, and sperm counts worldwide have fallen by 50 percent since 1938. Whales and dolphins and birds and little fungi are among our victims.⁵ Only science could double-baste the planet in CO₂, melting mighty glaciers and ancient ice caps.

Environmental scientist Duane Elgin predicts that in this twenty-first century, if current trends continue, we might drive 50 percent of the world’s plant and animal species to extinction.⁶ (And recall that death is the end of life; extinction is the end of birth.) The planet is now a coal mine with all kinds of canaries dropping. Elgin also compares our wiping out of other species on whom we depend to rivets popping out of the wings of an

airplane. How many rivets can a plane lose before it crashes? Twenty-five percent of the drugs prescribed in the United States derive from wild organisms.⁷ Science has discovered cures hidden in nature and enhanced our lives and longevity. An obscure fungus found in the mountains of Norway produces a powerful suppressor of the human immune system, allowing transplants to take hold.⁸ As we destroy our natural environment, are we not behaving like a stupid fetus devouring the womb that bears us?

New Determinants of Ethical Thinking

What a dear companion ethics would have been on the long march of science. Ethics can be more formally defined as *the effort to bring sensitivity and method to the discernment of moral value*. More simply yet, it is the struggle to figure out what is good and bad for us and for this generous host of an earth, tucked away in this privileged little corner of the universe. Ethics is not a dictator. It is a mind-expanding, questioning art that brakes the blind momentum fueled by unasked questions and untested assumptions.

Wonder. This big-brained species with its humongous promise becomes deadly when we lose the ability to stop and look and see and say “Wow!” And “Wow,” after all, is the very first step of ethics; wonder is the beginning of wisdom. Healthy ethics champions our essential capacity for awe. Done well, ethics is the cure for squinting, narrowed eyes fixed on texts and tasks while losing the ecstasy of wide-eyed wonder. It is the cure for an arid technopolis, where the prizing of beauty withers and where art and poetry lose their saving, life-expanding allure. The perception of beauty may be the crown jewel of human intelligence.

Surgeon and author Leonard Shlain argues that as we grew in technical skills, culture lost its balance, opting for “left brain” accents rather than “right brain,” the *yang* over against the *yin*. That makes sense since left-brain talents are in analysis,

ordering, balancing, and organizing. But the right brain is where compassion, kindness, nurturing, a synthesizing sense of the whole, intuition, metaphor, and, yes, humor and laughter flourish.⁹ The left brain, says Shlain, reasons, gives us speech and order, but it hugs less and laughs less. An overly left-brained culture is lamed. It is less equipped to do effective ethics since ethics involves both right- and left-brain powers and becomes insipid or worse if either dimension of human cognition is slighted.

Practical Wisdom. To put this talk of ethics differently, and in the way Aristotle would, ethics is nothing less or more than practical wisdom. Anyone who finds that description off-putting should remember that the alternative would be impracticality and stupidity! Ethics is no more threatening to science and human progress than is a lighthouse to a mariner. The dumb things we do when moral questions are not asked is proof of their necessity. Human affairs do not unfold in a moral vacuum. Yet even an intelligent, serious scholars like Arthur Schlesinger Jr. could write an article some years ago entitled “The Necessary Amoral-ity of Foreign Affairs.”¹⁰ Why would a serious and sensitive scholar like George Kennan warn against making “constant attempts at moral appraisal” in international politics and warn against “making ourselves slaves of the concepts of international law and morality”? The problem is not that these are immoral men; the problem is that they show confusion about the nature of morality and the role of ethics. In the half century following such confused references to morality and ethics, we have, while avoiding serious “attempts at moral appraisal” and “the concepts of international law and morality,” started brutal and unwinnable wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq; blocked international efforts to heal the environment; and failed to address world poverty seriously.

Carol Bly compares our long-time aversion to discourse on morality and the **common good** to

sexual suppression and notes how our literature mirrors this eerie emptiness:

If an American were to turn out a novel or story . . . in which men and women characters consorted together without one mention of physical desire, we would wonder in reviews and at lunch why the author suppressed sexuality. Yet hundreds of novels and stories offer us American characters who live out their lives without any political and ethical anxiety. We ought to be calling it suppression, because we are as much political and moral creatures as we are sexual creatures.¹¹

Religion. Throughout history, those conglomerations known as the world's religions have been moralcentric in their concern. Amid all of their myths and stories, their mission has been twofold: to figure out what this world is and what our role in it should be. Religions have been the loudest and most influential voices in issuing "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not." As Buddhist philosopher David Loy points out, the "traditional religions are fulfilling this role less and less, because that function is being supplanted—or overwhelmed—by other belief systems and value systems."¹² He is not yet ready to label the world's major religions "moribund," but he doesn't shy from saying that "it is somewhat ludicrous to think of conventional

religious institutions as we know them today serving a significant role in solving the environmental crisis. Their more immediate problem is whether they, like the rain forests we anxiously monitor, will survive in any recognizable form the onslaught of this new religion."¹³ That new major religion, he says, is our current economic system. It is the **market** that is telling us what this world is and how we should behave in it. It is the mar-

ket that is issuing the modern "shalts" and "shalt not."¹⁴

Loy continues, saying that "the discipline of economics is less a science than the theology of that religion, and its god, the Market, has become a vicious circle of ever-increasing production and consumption by pretending to offer a secular salvation." With communism faded away, says Loy, "the Market is becoming the first truly world religion, binding all corners of the globe into a worldview and set of values whose religious role we overlook only because we insist on seeing them as 'secular.'"¹⁵ If philosophical and religious ethics stand aside, the vacuum will be filled.

In a word, ethics doesn't go away. We are never unconcerned with the questions of what is good for us or bad. Historian Arnold Toynbee observed that "the distinction between good and evil seems to have been drawn by all human beings at all times and places. The drawing of it

seems, in fact, to be one of the intrinsic and universal characteristics of our common nature."¹⁶

THINKING CRITICALLY

The character Gordon Gekko in Oliver Stone's movie *Wall Street* famously made a defense of greed: "Well, in my book you either do it right or you get eliminated. . . . Thank you. I am not a destroyer of companies. I am a liberator of them! The point is, ladies and gentleman, that greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right, greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms—greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge—has marked the upward surge of mankind. And greed, you mark my words, will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA. Thank you very much." (Oliver Stone and Stanley Weiser, *Wall Street*, 1987. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094291/> [May 18, 2009])

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But if ethics is not done openly and honestly, it will be done surreptitiously, as is happening with the economic system and the naïve faith that *scientific = good*. The value judgments of this new religion are influential but the ethics it contains stays under wraps. If economic dogma dismisses the claims of the environment as an irrelevant “externality” and sees human rights and essential needs as categories that do not compute, moral and political choices will be made and made badly on these issues, and the earth and its beleaguered poor will perish. A thing called **globalization** will be hailed like the return of Elijah or the second coming of Jesus Christ, and the dynamics of the market will be seen to be as natural and unchallengeable as the law of gravity. With ethics thus supplanted, and with science giving us daunting new power, earth-wrecking can proceed apace and the accumulating debris becomes the price of “doing business.” And so indeed it has come to pass.¹⁷

Regaining Our Ethical Sense

Something is happening. Ethics is making a comeback, and the door to it has been opened by our most basic emotion, fear. Respected voices are crying, “Apocalypse now!” “Development” itself, as well as “progress,” is being questioned. The *more = good* axiom is being dashed with vigorous critique. If we were to return to tenth-century Europe, we would find the belief that the *aetas aurea*, the golden age, had ended and culture was spiraling down. Citizens of that age believed that we were born too late with nought but gloom and doom our destiny. Eight centuries later, that myth did a total reversal as we got smarter with our toys and tools and suddenly the “golden age” moved from past to future. “We ain’t seen nothing yet” became our myth and faith. It was morning in the world. But now, all of a sudden, in our day, the sun is dipping and the shadow of night is falling upon us.

Dire Consequences in the Absence of Ethics

Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright says with chilling calmness:

One perspective, which I don’t find unrealistic, is of humanity as approaching its extinction as a zoological species. The idea has often disturbed people. . . . For my part I cannot find it especially disturbing. Humanity as a species will at some time with certainty cease to exist; whether it happens after hundreds of thousands of years or after a few centuries is trifling in the cosmic perspective. When one considers how many species humans have made an end of, then such a natural nemesis can perhaps seem justified.¹⁸

Playwright and former Czech Republic president Vaclav Havel warns that if we endanger the earth, she will dispense with us in the interests of a higher value—that is, life itself. Evolutionist Lynn Margulis joins the grim chorus, saying that the rest of the earth’s life did very well without us in the past and will do very well without us in the future.

New York University physics professor Marty Hoffert adds to this gloom boom: “It may be that we’re not going to solve global warming, the earth is going to become an ecological disaster, and somebody will visit in a few hundred million years and find there were some intelligent beings who lived here for a while, but they just couldn’t handle the transition from being hunter-gatherers to high technology. It’s entirely possible.”¹⁹

A dire conclusion presses in on us: *If current trends continue, we will not.*

Contemporary **apocalypticists** indict us with this judgment: that the two greatest disasters to hit this generous planet have been (1) the asteroidal pummeling of sixty-five million years ago that extinguished the dinosaurs and other life-forms and (2) the arrival of the rogue species that calls itself (all too prematurely) the *animal rationale*, the rational animal.

The Good News

The good news, in a hedged sort of way, is that some say it is not too late. Christopher Flavin of Worldwatch Institute (which has led the wise worriers for years) greeted 2007 with an article entitled “It May Not Be Too Late.” That’s about as reassuring as the pilot announcing: “This plane may not crash.” But it does signal an opportunity to ask, “What’s wrong?” and to invite in that discipline called ethics, which specializes in such questions and in the task of awakening consciences.

Spirituality is often the code word for ethical awakening. Interest in it is suddenly in vogue. Indeed, spirituality is more popular than religion. People who would not darken the door of a church, temple, or mosque are open to discussion of spirituality. The left-wing investigative magazine *Mother Jones* devoted a whole issue to spirituality, with the cover title “Believe It or Not: Spirituality Is the New Religion.”²⁰ Books and articles appear on spirituality in the workplace. There are many definitions and notions of what spirituality is, but the phenomenon signals a hunger for the clear thinking that ethics is charged with providing. The modern mind is also being focused on because of the ongoing demythologization of war.

War, Terrorism, and Globalization

I write now at a time when the state-sponsored violence we call “war” is simultaneously rampaging and getting embarrassed. Even though there were

149 wars between 1945 and 1992, with more appearing since as groups of humans bang “against one another with no more plan or principle than molecules in an overheated gas”²¹—still, with all of that, realists, not just idealists, are now chal-

lenging the inevitability of **war**. War has reached a moral turning point where it can no longer do more good than harm, the basic test of every moral choice. The reasons offered for war cannot be truthful; it can never deliver what it promises.

The old principle of “non-combatant immunity” has become infeasible. Science has ended the possibility of limiting the horrors of war to uniformed combatants. If we take as a rock-solid ethical principle—and we should—that what is good for children is good and what is bad for children is ungodly, the new data are grim. According to journalist Chris Hedges, “More than 2 million children were killed in wars during the 1990s. Three times that number were disabled or seriously injured. Twenty

million children were displaced from their homes in 2001 alone.”²² In the wars of the 1990s, civilian deaths constituted between 75 and 90 percent of all war deaths. That makes war and terrorism convertible terms and takes away the respectability of the havoc we euphemistically call “war.” Nuclear weapons have moved war from thinkable to unthinkable. We have prepared the end of the world and packed it away in our arsenals.

Terrorism, by definition, means the deliberate killing of civilians to achieve your political goal.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Rachel Carson was a biologist working for the federal government when she first noticed the effects of unregulated use of pesticides and herbicides. In 1962, at a time when her health was failing, she published her controversial work, *Silent Spring*. She was attacked and called “an ignorant and hysterical woman,” but her work sparked a revolution in environmental policy and ecological consciousness. Her book was translated into twenty-two languages.

Read Carson’s book, *Silent Spring* (Mariner Books, 2002), or see the televised presentation, now on DVD, of *Silent Spring* as produced for the PBS series *The American Experience* by WGBH-TV, Boston.

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War has transmogrified into terrorism, bringing the human race to a crossroads. Science has rewritten the medieval script. The new choice for humankind is this: find alternatives to war—or accept terrorism as your only defense. Europe, that military tinderbox of yore, now exemplifies the alternative to war: *economic and political interdependence*. In the European Union, they don't go to war with each other anymore; they bargain and they negotiate.

The United Nations Charter proposed an idea that may have seemed idealistic in the ashes of World War II but now has become sheer practicality. As international law expert Richard Falk writes:

World War II ended with the historic understanding that recourse to war between states could no longer be treated as a matter of national discretion, but must be regulated to the extent possible through rules administered by international institutions. The basic legal framework was embodied in the UN Charter, a multilateral treaty largely crafted by American diplomats and legal advisers. Its essential feature was to entrust the Security Council with administering a prohibition of recourse to international force (Article 2, Section 4) by states except in circumstances of self-defense, which itself was restricted to responses to a prior “armed attack” (Article 51), and only then until the Security Council had the chance to review the claim.²³

This policing paradigm is not **pacifism** that says that all killing is evil. It stipulates, rather, that any nation planning to attack another militarily must face not only that nation but all nations coordinated—police style—into an international security force. This would be an impressive deterrent. Of course, nations, and especially the United States, have trashed this historic initiative and returned to the vigilante approach to warring. “Like a dog returning to its vomit is a stupid man

who repeats his folly” (Prov. 26:11). Yet, ironically, the American dogs of war have given a lesson to the world on the wisdom of the United Nations Charter. Witness the United States’ fatal follies in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. None of these killing adventures passes the elementary “more good than harm” test. The United States while in militaristic heat has been the unwitting witness to the inutility of traditional war.²⁴ That opens the door to a new ethical critique of state-sponsored violence, a bloody invitation to clarity of thought.

Globalization of commerce adds clout to the lesson. A Chinese official was quoted on television shortly after the American invasion of Iraq as saying to Americans: “You people invade countries that are rich in oil. We simply buy the oil. It's cheaper and no one gets hurt.” He could have added: “If you insist on warring, we will lend you the money to do so at handsome interest and then we will use that interest to buy oil.” It is a lovely thing for our species when doing good and doing well happily coincide. Such is the case now as nonviolent modes of power are proving more efficient and enriching.

The new lesson we are learning is that intelligent economics and diplomacy trump bludgeoning as policy. It is promising that we live in an age when empire, too, is becoming anachronistic. Empire is the exploitation of the weak by the powerful. Its tools are military and economic might. The United States has been having a go at it, but its empire is cracking at the seams. Environmental professor Vaclav Smil, writing three years before the 2008 financial collapse, predicted that within a short time “there will be a profoundly altered United States: economically weaker and technically less competent, with an impotent currency, rampant corruption, and distant memories of superpower glory.”²⁵ Anyone who has exchanged dollars for euros will know that that collapse is well begun. Declining empires are dangerous. They go not gently into night. They require ethical intensive care.

Reinvigorating Ethics

Practicality invites a reinvigorated ethics to fresh analysis of the use of collective force and to investigate the multiple modes of power overlooked by the military mind. This book will address the neglected art of peace-making and present a power chart showing the ethical alternatives to kill-power.

Human knowledge is pluriform; there are multiples ways by which we achieve reality contact. To bring that reality into analytical focus, I employ an architectonic tool, a wheel model that includes a hub of diagnostic questions to guard against the hazard of incomplete information and then develops nine ways in which human intelligence makes contact with reality. The wheel model will be discussed in detail starting in chapter 7. Some of those cognitive modalities are obvious and not neglected in most standard treatments of ethics; some are less obvious, like tragedy, comedy, affect, and creative imagination. This method stresses creativity as our supreme moral faculty and show its relationship to **courage** since timid minds stray reluctantly from the miring pastures of the tried and the familiar. History is a maelstrom and our knowing

takes place there. Many are the forces that boggle the mind on the road to truth. These have to be dealt with. Hence, this method has a chapter on

“the hazards of moral, political, and economic discourse.” These include such things as myth, strategic forgetfulness, momentum and mood, false analogues and seductive abstractions, and more. At every point the method here developed fights the TINA (There Is No Alternative) temptation. The TINA syndrome paralyzes social ethical discourse like a collective cerebral stroke.

Justice, Class, and the Common Good

Justice requires special handling and I will give it special stress. Studies of justice list more than fifty forms of justice. I will argue that all these are reducible to three: commutative (or inter-individual) justice, social justice, and distributive justice. I will present a model that illustrates how every society labors to find a balance between individual good and the common good (see p. 56). I’ll accept the challenge of defining “the common good,” a slippery term that is often used and rarely tied down. I will argue that all systems of law with more or less success are operating within this trinity of justice

THINKING CRITICALLY

Morality is not just a matter of the customs of the tribe you happen to be in. Some moral insights are remarkably resonant throughout very different cultures.

The Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” is one of humankind’s highest and nearly universally held ideals, and it can be found in essence in all the great religions of the world. Religions, with all their faults, are the repositories of some of the most important sensitivities of humankind.

- Good people proceed while considering that what is best for others is best for themselves. (Hitopadesa, Hinduism)
- Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. (Leviticus 19:18, Judaism)
- Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that people should do to you, do ye ever so to them. (Matthew 7:12, Christianity)
- Hurt not others with that which pains yourself. (Udanavarga 5:18, Buddhism)
- What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others. (Analects 15:23, Confucianism)
- No one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself. (Traditions, Islam)

forms. Traditional economics often slights the core significance of essential human need and the relationship of need to human rights. Healthy justice theory does not. I will illustrate this justice theory by application to thorny issues like preferential affirmative action, the distribution of limited resources including organs for transplant, debt cancellation in response to poverty crises, and taxation of international money exchanges. I will also argue that basic health care is a human right like the right to literacy or the right to vote, not a consumer item to be gotten if you can afford it. Justice theory is at the heart of all those issues.

Ethics has to put major stress on the category of *class*, working on the thesis that if you show me your zip code, I will usually get a good peek into your conscience as well as your wallet. Moral judgments often gush forth from our perceived interests, with little intervening reflection or critique. “People go after what they perceive to be in their own interests,” said the apostle Paul to the Philippians, sounding almost like a member of the Chicago School of Economics. Transcending narrowly conceived self-interest in ways that favor community and the common good, and, at the same time, guarding a sensible self-interest, is a perennial ethical challenge, and we’ll wrestle with it here.

Power, Affluence, and Fertility

Vaclav Havel put it this way:

I think there are good reasons for suggesting that the modern age has ended. Today, many things indicate that we are going through a transitional period, when it seems that something is on the way out and something else is painfully being born. It is as if something were crumbling, decaying and exhausting itself, while something else, still indistinct, were arising from the rubble.²⁶

In the United States where I write, the halcyon euphoria that followed World War II and lingered for two decades was pregnant with illusions and false hopes. Thomas Aquinas sagely observed that young people and drunks are most liable to false hopes.²⁷ Post–World War II America was a drunken youngster. The shedding of illusions and the pains of maturing are upon us. Our now ongoing value quake compares well to what happened in Japan more than a century ago. Commodore Perry in 1853 opened eyes and ports when his ships steamed into Yedo Bay. Japan had been hiding from reality and its unavoidable tumults. Now, we in this slowly humbling nation are meeting our Yedo Bay as new realities and our limits meet a new day of rapid change.

Ethics to a large extent is a study of power, and power in our day is mutating (as I will show in a graph of the multiple modes of power that operate in society) Following the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, sovereignty was attributed to the individual nation-state, and all laws and wars accepted that arrangement as a law of nature. Slowly and without fanfare the nation-state has been shorn of its hegemony. Behemoth entities, called corporations, have arisen, displacing the power of states. While taking little note of it, we have arrived at the point where “of the world’s one hundred largest economies, fifty are now corporations—not including banking and financial institutions.”²⁸ Corporate lobbies muscle out the voice of the *demos*; democracy becomes lobby-ocracy. When sheer power acts without ethical reflection, the people perish, and the earth with them.

For two hundred years, the affluent part of the world has been on orgy mode. I’ve never attended an orgy, but I can’t imagine they end on a happy note. This one is not ending merrily, as the time of normalized excess slowly crashes. When I was born, there were some two and a half billion people on the planet. There are triple that number now with no date certain for a cap on growth. It

all depends on those more than one billion adolescents who dwell among us. Half the people on the planet are under twenty-five. There are more young fertiles on the planet now than there were people in 1960. Their reproductive behavior is unpredictable. Poverty as well as orgiastic excess lead to over-reproductivity. As our numbers swell, a terrible formula looms:

$$H + A + A = A$$

Hyperfertility + Affluence + Appetite = Apocalypse. As a colleague from India said to me, “We are intent on making all the mistakes you made but making them faster.” If everyone were to live as North Americans and Europeans live, the planet could not sustain more than three billion of us. It would require several supplementary planets to keep the party going. But as people “develop” into affluence, their appetite grows accordingly, and therein lies the road to apocalypse. The apocalypse has already started but is only dimly impinging on our collective awareness. Hunger has replaced war as the most efficient killer. Some forty million people die every year from hunger and poverty-related causes—the equivalent of three hundred jumbo jet crashes daily, with half of the passengers being children.²⁹

It is a rule of nature for any species: we limit our numbers, or nature will do it for us. We, the ethical animal, are the only species that can make that decision reflectively and freely. Family planning is not a luxury. It is essential and will always be so: family planning means contraception with access to safe abortion as an option when necessary.³⁰ But not by condoms alone shall we be saved. As ethicist James Martin-Schramm writes, there must also be a redistribution “of land and income, improvement in access to education and employment, the elimination of discrimination based on race or sex, and substantial improvement in access to affordable housing, food, and health care.”³¹ And that agenda is the very stuff of

ethics and justice theory, especially that painful word *redistribution*.

The Urgency for Ethical Action

So there is much that is harshly new in this time, but there is also something that is not new. The human race has always teetered between barbarity and morality, with morality only slowly establishing its claims. This dialectic continues with new tones. The stakes, of course, are higher now. Technological barbarians are more dangerous. But the gateway to an alternative to barbarism is, as it always has been, ethical reflection. The ancients said: “He who reflects not in his heart is like the beast that perishes.” That really is not true. The beasts are better off. Even without reflection, they have instinct that imbues them with the wisdom of survival.

Some years ago I spoke on demographic issues to a group of Ford Foundation program officers at a meeting near Athens, Greece. When we stopped for a twenty-minute break, they urged me upon return to explain better the terms *ethics* and *the common good*. I headed down a dirt path leading to the sparkling Aegean Sea. Ahead of me I saw what looked like a black ribbon stretched across the path. As I neared it, I saw it was two rows of black ants, one row carrying something and the other row obviously returning for a load. A real estate move was in process. I stepped over the columns reverently and went down to feast on the beauty of the waters. On my return the ants were gone, their mission accomplished. What a splendid example they gave me to bring back to the Ford Foundation people. All those ants were committed to the common good. There were no divisive special-interest groups, no shirkers from the mission. This commitment to the common good was inscribed in their genes.

Our genes, it seems, are a mixed bag with an inbuilt tilt toward **egoism**. They definitely do not

propel us generously toward the common good. For our species, genetic inscription doesn't fill the bill. For us, the alternative is ethics, that delicate activity of moral beings. We will neither survive nor flourish by instinct, but only by the activation of our moral consciousness.

If ethics seems dull, and often it does when it is reduced to a rehearsal of the unapplied thoughts

of long-ago dead men—and a few women—it is ethicists who have made it so. I have strived not to join them in that sin. Ethics is about life with its tragedy and comedy, its variety and its shocks, its conundrums and its dreams. None of that should be boring.

Summary of Key Themes

- Ethics provides insight into how we should or ought to live our lives in concert with nature, as science provides insight into what is possible and how it might be achieved—two disciplines that need to work in tandem.
- The limits of science and economic reasoning to address ethical implications of human behavior—notably, the threat and practice of war and terrorism—demand a renewed ethical sense of all people.
- Dire consequences exist for human and animal populations unless power relationships and the excesses of affluent lifestyles are transformed.

Key Terms

Animal rationale

Apocalypticists

Common good

Courage

Demos

Egoism

Ethics

Globalization

H + A + A = A

Hyperfertility

Justice

Market

Moral/morality

Noncombatant immunity

Pacifism

Policing paradigm

Practical wisdom

Redistribution

Religion

Scientism

Spirituality

Value-free objectivity

War

Questions for Discussion

1. Explain the new way of going to war according to the United Nations Charter (see p. 9). Why is this called the “policing” way of war? How would it deter prospective invaders?
2. Advertisers say that if they know your zip code, they can say what you wear, drive, and eat. Does one's zip code signal one's “class” and therefore also tell something of one's conscience? Does your economic class control conscience or just influence it?
3. What moral questions were ignored as the ongoing ecological crisis unfolded? What moral questions should have been asked?

4. Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street* said that greed is good. Aristotle said that justice holds human community together. Could greed do that? If not, why not?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Elliot, Robert, ed. *Environmental Ethics*. Oxford Readings in Philosophy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Hedges, Chris. *What Every Person Should Know about War*. New York: Free Press, 2003.

Nash, James A. *Loving Nature*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1991.

Worldwatch Institute. *Vision for a Sustainable World*. 2008. <http://www.worldwatch.org> (July 2009). Visit this website to see what issues are being discussed today on the global environment.