

# PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS FOUNDATIONS OF A GLOBAL ETHIC

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An ethical system of a particular religious or cultural group delineates the values by which the members of that community are expected to live, especially as they relate to one another. The term has also been applied to the standards that govern our attitudes and actions towards non-human life and the natural world (especially among Jains, Hindus, and Buddhists, and to a lesser extent in some of the Levitic codes of Jewish scripture). Even when ethical systems are not fixed in written form, they tend to be deeply ingrained in a given cultural unit and passed down from each generation to the next in whatever ways that group has developed to preserve its most central, foundational values -- those ways of thinking, being, and acting that have developed over time through interaction with surrounding conditions (human as well as natural) and in their interplay make a community uniquely itself. A group's ethical system is inextricably braided into the self-understanding and sense of belonging of the members of that community and reflects the deepest, most stable structures which hold the community together, much like the hub of a wheel allows the spokes to revolve in unison and keeps the wheel from flying apart.

Hence, ethical systems tend to be very resistant to change, and conflict results when previously isolated groups come into close contact as a result of migration, population growth, territorial expansion, commercial interaction, the conquests of war, missionary activity, through the written word, print, and other assorted media. Conflict tends to be especially pronounced when such contact with the "other" is sudden and large scale. Until some ten years ago, the rate of this culture-mingling process, while clearly accelerating, was nevertheless fairly predictable. Since the middle 1980s, however, something occurred that may well be called the twentieth century "cyber-revolution" by future historians.

I am referring to the exponential increase in the number of personal computers, high-speed modems, fax machines, the Internet, and other newly developed tools for almost instant and either free or at least low cost mass communication (such as the World Wide Web). Humanity is suddenly faced with the challenge of spawning literally millions of separate groups whose members share interests, attitudes, and information while being physically located anywhere on earth and, concurrently, as a by-product, the rapid globalization of the human community as a whole. No longer are images and text travelling by themselves. Computer information arrives along with human commentators who, in all ways except skin-to-skin contact, are as accessible as one's next-door neighbors and may come out of a physical community ten thousand miles and several continents removed.

This development was truly unprecedented and could not be fully anticipated until it was actually occurring, even though as early as 1949, the Jesuit paleontologist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin not only linked terms such as "ultra-hominisation" (*Man's Place in Nature* 109) with the natural sciences but anticipated an essential role for "those astonishing electronic machines (the starting point and hope of the young science of cybernetics) by which our mental capacity to calculate and combine is reinforced and multiplied ... [leading to] an auto-cerebralisation becoming the most highly concentrated expression of the reflective rebound of evolution" (111). Forty years after his death Teilhard would, one suspects, be gratified to see the world wide web weaving itself around the globe, spinning the beginnings of his noosphere, allowing ever new and more complex links, nodes, synapses, and networks to emerge and take on a life of their own--turning into the global super-brain.

Ethical systems originally grew as natural byproducts of people's need to regulate human interaction as *Homo sapiens* first emerged at the dawn of pre-history. In reciprocal action, they both helped shape their culture and were shaped by it. They are grounded in the very processes that distill order from chaos and distinguish human

beings from pre-human animals. Social animals that run in packs or migrate in flocks or graze in herds have rules that are unique to their patterns of flight formation or mating rituals. One can speculate that just as mating behavior is highly stylized among animals it was encrusted with originally instinctive prescriptions and proscriptions by the time humans became conscious of themselves as agents who are both mortal and capable of transcending mortality by passing ideas on to others.

All truly human accomplishments are the result of our awareness of our own finitude. The myth of the Fall is the story of the humanation of pre-human creatures who lived in the safe womb of immortality (unaware of their mortality) until they "ate of the tree of knowledge"-- and discovered themselves as persons destined to die. Self-consciousness brought with it the consciousness of death, and with awareness of death came the need and opportunity to plan for the future and create community that would endure. Religion emerged as humans experienced themselves as at once finite and infinite -- conscious centers of ordering that rise up and transform the non-human and not only, like other animals, transcend death in their genes but can do so through their ideas. Precisely in contingency, they saw themselves as related to something transcendent and grasped by the need to make meaning.

The first ethical systems were linked to a group's religion, and were codified, justified, and enforced in terms of transcendent commands and sanctions. While they often appear to be solely proscriptive they actually reflect a community's self-image, as mentioned before, and shared meaning system both positively and negatively, although the negative pole is frequently emphasized in practice. Proscription is shorthand for the fences and dams we build around those metaphoric chasms, swamps, flood plains, and volcanic regions that might wreck our carefully constructed world. It is the response to an ontology of fear. Prescription reflects the structures we build to celebrate our vitality, the metaphoric fields, orchards, roads, bridges, parks, temples, stadiums, technology, works of art, literature, and philosophy. It reflects an ontology of confidence.

Religion, as Leonard Swidler reminds us, is the symbolic and mythic language members of a community use to explain their world, to give ultimate meaning to and find ultimate meaning in existence, and to live according to what they have constructed or found. The rules of conduct presented as commandments are the riverbeds left behind the actual process of successfully forming a community; some are still flowing with life-giving water millennia after they began, but others are empty and dry. They are also inextricably connected to the rest of the landscape: rules taken out of their socio-economic and historical context and transplanted to different soil become obstacles to growth.

With the exception of several anti-metaphysical schools of contemporary thought, philosophy is another mode of giving meaning (though less concerned with ultimates), but emerges later in the history of ideas than religion and tends to be reflective, abstract, and theoretical -- which means that it is less effective than religion in directly affecting the practical lives of the average member of a given community. It represents the kind of essential speculative work, however, that lays the foundations for future development, precisely because it is not tied to expectations of any kind of short-term measurable effect. Nevertheless, we can tell much, for example, about Aristotle's world from "the Philosopher's" vision of the moral paragon, the "great-souled man" who walks slowly, speaks deliberately, treats inferiors with benign disdain, cares nothing for the adulation of the masses, and proudly follows the rational path of the golden mean.

The combination of multinational corporations, supersonic travel, film, television, and especially the phenomenal proliferation of internet communication, has resulted in radically novel modes and vastly increased frequency of people-to-people contact across vast distances, both by disseminating ideas almost instantaneously across the globe and by making it possible for individuals to move to faraway localities temporarily or permanently. This contact and mingling of often widely diverse worldviews, especially combined with the instability of population, presents humanity with an unprecedented challenge: both as opportunity for increased inter-human understanding and as risk of heightened xenophobia and withdrawal into private ideological fortresses. We can choose to permit this challenge to help us grow by focusing on our common humanity

coupled with respect for individuality, or we can allow it to shatter us into antagonistic shards by emphasizing differences, viewing variegation as an evil to be eliminated, and remaining blind to commonalities.

Both modes of knowing-relating-being have a long history, though in practice they are usually mixed, generating a plethora of gradations along a sliding scale between extremes. Nevertheless, most people, whether lay or academic, tend to follow one approach more than the other. These modes/models are as ancient as Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Lao Tzu -- a static, one-dimensional, absolutist, closed either-or (yang) model that values perfection/ completion/ permanence/ convention/ unity, and a dynamic, non-absolutist, multi-dimensional, open both- and process (yin) model that values growth/ evolution/ change/ novelty/ diversity. The static model operates primarily through vertical monologue and criticism. The dynamic model operates primarily through horizontal dialogue and empathy. The static model insists on sharp boundaries, and by definition excludes the "other" by any name. The dynamic model has permeable boundaries, and can include the static.

The static way and the dynamic way are complementary opposites and designed to dialogue with one another, the way the *yin* and the *yang* together generate the Chinese *t'ai-chi t'u* (Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate -- a circle divided by an S-curve into a light and dark complementary half). Long before the schools of Confucianism and Taoism developed, Chinese thinkers had already formulated a cosmic theory of a cyclic pattern of waxing and waning, of expansion and contraction. They symbolized this dynamic interplay of forces in the *t'ai-chi t'u*. As one focuses one's gaze on the diagram it becomes a vortex of rapid circular motion, of the constant interpenetration of the archetypal poles of nature, the yin and the yang. Applied separately, exclusively, and to the extreme, the static mode leads to petrification and the dynamic mode leads to disintegration.

The method we choose, and how we apply it, will affect the fate of humanity and possibly the entire planet. If we permit ourselves to learn from the patterns of biology, we can clearly see that the path of evolutionary success is the country road which is both stable and marked by permeable boundaries, tentative endings, experimentation, multiple winding paths, and flexibility; we can also see that the path of extinction -- if followed to the extreme -- is the toll road of closed boundaries, fixed endings, absolute certainty, a single straight and narrow path, and rigidity.

### **GLOBAL CIVILIZATION IS NOT A FUTURE POSSIBILITY; IT IS A PRESENT-DAY REALITY.**

Unlike most previous civilizations, it appears not to have gradually and naturally evolved a single central religion while conversely being shaped by that religion. Instead, much like the Hellenistic world of the late Roman Empire, contemporary global civilization is marked by religious, intellectual, and cultural pluralism. However, there would be no sense of coherence whatsoever and the issue of a global ethic would never have arisen if those who see themselves as shapers of this new universal civilization were not already committed to cross-cultural inter-religious dialogue. In fact, the very pluralism of the present age has taken on the markings of religion. The willingness to engage in this sort of dialogue is also a sign of psychological maturity and respect for the personhood of others.

Genuine dialogue demands that we accept that the human condition is necessarily full of tensions and contradictions and that no human view can be entirely adequate. Since it is precisely out of the inadequacy of all finite positions that the horizon of the Really Real opens for those who choose to allow it to do so, both inter-religious dialogue and work toward a global ethic can themselves precipitate something close to a broadly defined religious experience.

Authentic focus on pluralism and relativism (the \*expensive\* kind!) may literally become a "limit experience," a hint of the Other. At the very least, by imaginatively projecting ourselves into the "other" and allowing the "other" to project itself (her/himself) into us, by examining our own positions and comparing/contrasting them with those of others (both directly, in conversation partners, and indirectly, through texts) we can become

conscious of our situation in time and space, our sense of community, and the extent to which we live by negotiating through multiple worlds of meaning and hold them together.

Either way, the process of collaborating with others from all over the world may itself take on some of the characteristics of a religious act, an \*invitation\* to look at things a certain way, to celebrate differences while rejoicing in convergence (NOT conformity), to undergo what Lawrence Sullivan calls an "initiation," a sort of Lonerganian appropriation/conversion. Thus, while neither interreligious dialogue nor the Global Ethic project propagate certain specific, already existing faiths or ideologies, the process of engaging in these kinds of activities has itself the potential of becoming the catalyst of a genuine change in the way human persons understand themselves, one-another, the world, and ultimate reality.

To embrace pluralism constructively is a metaphysical commitment, a stepping out of one's cozy cave of familiar certainties and modes of functioning into the larger arena of competing paradigms and values. At this point participants in the dialogue become more than transmitters of information, facilitators of the exchange of ideas. They become agents of change, Socratic midwives, who de-familiarize the familiar and encourage their fellow-seekers to break through their respective pupa shells without leaving them newly-hatched and unprotected in a void, their old assurances and criteria for judgment gone, and nothing to take their place. All those involved are drawn into the ongoing conversation on an existential level, and all are at once learners and teachers, mutually responsible for themselves and others.

If we want to help build a future for humanity and the world it is absolutely obligatory that we develop an ethic governing human-to-human relationships to which people from all over the world, and particularly community leaders, can agree. In addition, the many destructive ways in which human beings affect the environment have made it a matter of planetary survival that we develop nature-friendly standards of interacting with the environment.

If we can learn to include non-human nature into the loving embrace of some version of the universally accepted Golden Rule, then, I believe, we will reach an even deeper current of the universal law of love, one that allows a confluence of the religious stream of Abraham not only with the mighty rivers of India and China but also with the springs of countless indigenous religions and the tributaries of secular ideologies as we share the stories that give meaning to our lives. In the words of David Tracy, "then the autonomy of each will be respected because each will be expected to continue, indeed to intensify, a journey into her/his own particularity" (*The Analogical Imagination* 449). Tracy continues, "The actuality of variety and the demand for authentic particularity unite as the environment of all. An analogical imagination may yet free us to a communal conversation on behalf of the kairos of this our day -- the communal and historical struggle for the emergence of a humanity both finally global and ultimately humane" (453) -- in other words, if the analogical imagination ushers in what Leonard Swidler calls the Age of Dialogue.