

For a Rational Ethics

A. De Paoli

1 Introduction

Can ethics have a rational basis or is there an *a priori* set of principles to which one adheres as best as possible? That is, can one actually build up an ethics or is it something *within* us? To answer this it is, of course, necessary to suspend one's prejudices and try and understand the origin of morality, and its purpose. One has to be willing to suspend one's prejudice if the search is to be useful at all. One cannot simply assume that there *is* a set of principles, much less that one's own set *are* the true set of principles.¹

The fragility of life, and the unfair (arbitrarily so) distribution of goods, of peace and of span of life lead one to sense a deep injustice. The total insignificance of entire species of animals, let alone single representatives underlines the sense of nihilism. But this does not diminish the importance of life, if anything it raises it to unparalleled heights. It is the most cherished of gifts.

There is a sense of wonder at being alive, which should give us that sense of "happiness" that comes of enjoyment of this incredible gift. What is this consciousness, this realization of being a self? And the communion of this feeling with a sense of participating in something far larger than any individual can it not inspire a feeling for others, a need to reach out and guarantee the same right to "enjoy" this gift to others?

Life is imbued with the meaning that each individual confers to it, no more and no less. No one but a conscious being has the possibility of appropriating (making proper or own) the sense of life, a project² which creates the meaning. Because its meaning is not found "*there*", but must be rekindled each moment. But if the individual is incapable of elevating life to the sense of wonder that the cosmos inspires, then there is a sense of defeat, for it is like the parable of the money which has been hidden away for safekeeping and has not been made to grow.

Ethics is much deeper than religion, politics or law. It precedes them, insofar as they are only vehicles for embodying, and enforcing a given set of principles. These, and many other social structures, presuppose social mores, which dictate morality more out of habit and custom than of any real understanding of the problematics to which they are applied. They are also usually ever evolving compromises between different sets of beliefs, customs and principles. For most people religion, politics and other social constructs (such as national, local and family structures) are the means by which ethics are expressed. Most people do not approach religion (or any of the other structures) with a critical attitude,

¹If one is willing to question one's set of principles, perhaps in Cartesian fashion of doubt, and suspending them one finds that they were effectively a rational set of principles and that no better set can apply one is indeed fortunate. But I do venture to point out that I am quite skeptical that any such set can indeed prove to be *objectively* the best.

²*project* in the original sense, from Latin, to launch ahead

but are usually born or *indoctrinated* into it. It doesn't take much to see that most people belong to the same religious group as their parents, which usually marry only within the religious group, or there are the occasional "converts" into another religion, but usually these are more of an emotional response to some crisis (if not outright opportunistic) than a rational comparison between the values of one faith versus another.³

Religion has been a vehicle for moral codes, which allowed an individual to use as a treasure of values for questions which might crop up from time to time. It allowed one to not have to think through each problem, but to entrust one's ethics to others who worked them out for the community as a whole. The religious individual appeals to the religious community, but presupposes that all others belong to the same group. This was more than enough when the evolution of problems was slow, and transportation made contact with different groups unlikely. Religion thereby offered an unquestioned monolithic set of principles. But that veneer of universality has worn thin given modern communications, and the diversity of situations which we are witnesses to, and which we are thrust into vicariously.

Very similar arguments are also apt regarding politics and social customs. It is important to remember that what one may consider as obvious, or *the correct* way may not be at all obvious or correct to someone else. Just think of the different social customs one must observe at a dinner table in different regions of the world, or the enormous difference in what is taboo and what is not, even when traveling within a single continent.

Which brings us to the question: who should determine what is moral and what is not. It should be obvious that each individual should ponder, that is, should contemplate for themselves what morality is. This is quite difficult in and of itself, for what are the criteria by which one may know that one's thinking on it is correct, for we are led back to the question: by what authority may we trust someone's judgment over another's? It is even more difficult, but of even greater concern to us when it is put into practice however: when judges, politicians, religious leaders speak out, meet out punishment or create laws or act not as individuals but as representatives of segments of society. For then who is to say that what they do effectively represents what the majority believe?

An even more ticklish question, can a majority decide what is ethical, or is there someone who is better equipped to determine what is moral and what is not?

It should also be borne in mind that morality, in human society, will probably tend to diverge more and more from the "natural" impulses which are at the root of much of our habits. Individuals have inherited probably much which allowed greater guarantee of procreation, but which stands in marked contrast with

³I do not want to get into details regarding the sociology of religion, which however is interesting in its own right. I hope these bold generalizations do not blind the reader to the arguments that follow, and that the reader will keep an open mind. One useful thing to bear in mind is that if something stirs an emotional response there probably is some irrational motive for that behavior, and what I would like to elicit is quite the opposite, a rational thinking out of one's beliefs.

social responsibility in a society which has evolved. Just imagine the difference between a hunter-gatherer society, where no moral imperative would guarantee survival for an orphan, to a modern society where an orphan has (in theory) the same rights as any other child.

A secular system of ethics implies that each individual must bear the burden of accepting one's own inconsistency (there is no appeal to "god's will") and, more importantly, imposes *empathy* to be foremost the criteria of fairness. Only if I can see through the other's eyes, the other's point of view can I sense what it is that would be fair or "*right*" in that situation. Precisely because there is no universal principle outside of us, must I turn to a view of the other's inner feeling to understand what the relevant criteria are in judging my own actions before those around me.

2 Religion

Ethics, as a system of principles of conduct, exists apart from any religious beliefs. The former is constructed from one's personal experience and social milieu, but not confined to it, while the latter is a structure that is identified by certain (*irrational*) beliefs such as the existence of god or the immortality of an individual (*via a soul or in an after life or future resurrection*). These beliefs are usually coupled with ritualized behavior. Morality is then a "socially sanctioned behavior".

Religion however must cloak its ethics in the vest of universal absolutes. It cannot permit individual questioning of its authority, it cannot risk calling into question its authority. So the ethics have been removed from morality: the consequences of an act are no longer important, it is only whether or not a proscribed act has been committed. So no act, for religion, is private (i.e. god sees everything), even acts between two consenting adults. This of course precludes a secular act which is subject to scrutiny, and which holds us responsible for the consequences it may have.

The presence or absence of religious beliefs does not add nor does it diminish one's ethical "solidity." One may be ethical or not and yet be a religious fanatic. One may be immoral and yet be a religious bigot. I think it is hard to deny that in many faiths the duty of the religious hierarchy is to call the "faithful" to order and to define what is and what is not immoral, but that these guidelines are consequences of a religious structure not causes. There are even debates within most (if not all religions) as to what is right and wrong (*i.e.*, what is moral and what is not).

Religion does not guarantee "ethical behavior". In fact its principles are the result of codification, by (many) generations, of moral codes which may cover such arbitrary acts as wearing one's hair a certain way, to the "appropriate clothing", prescribing rituals and what and when something may be eaten.⁴

⁴Strictly speaking it is not religion that prescribes the mores, but the society that gave birth to that religion. In other words: religion is what transforms morals (social conduct) into ethics (right and wrong).

To say that religion is an irrational set of doctrines is not necessarily derogatory, but simply a statement of fact. Religion, being a “belief,” *must be* irrational, otherwise it would be a science, a knowledge. The etymology of the term itself **rex-ligio**, the “*binding oneself to one’s leader*,” indicates its irrational source (and something of its purpose as well). There are few religions that claim to be demonstrable anymore, that is to be deducible from first principles. (Though they claim to be revealed. If we scratch at the surface of the meaning of these revelations it usually seems more of a hiding, an obscuring, than a revelation. God sort of playing hide and seek with his chosen few.)

I think that some religious convictions are at the root of some un-ethical behavior. For example the Christian belief (most notably in Catholicism) that the world was created for man (I use the word advisedly). From this point of view an animal’s life is “less sacred” than a man’s. How can a Christian speak out against hunting, or using animals in experiments, or for that matter, against cruelty to animals? A Christian can speak out from an individual conscience, but not as a Christian (at least, as this certainly is not much of an improvement over those religion’s that claim that a woman has no soul: which dictates even the fashion and behavior of a woman in the presence of a man to the point of negating her identity as an individual). To be coherent with one’s principle if someone considers vivisection necessary to save (other) human lives then we should accept vivisection applied to people as well. There must be a “moral imperative” for which that is frowned upon.

Religion is in and of itself neither good nor bad. It certainly had a specific purpose in the evolution of society (or perhaps more correctly a set of combined purposes). It is a phenomenon that has incorporated most of the ritualized social behavior together with social taboos. The two are not, after all, so far apart. Ethology has a lot to teach us regarding the ritualistic behavior in daily life, such as the bad luck charms, sign of the cross, astrology, as well as the manifestations of social mores. Just witness the courtship and marriage rites, and the ritualization of changes in social standing such as the rites of passage into adulthood in Bar Mitzvah or confirmation, or acceptance into the community at birth in circumcision or baptism. Religion intertwines daily ritual with social functions so as to give the members of those community guidelines on which to fall back. Lay society has given religion less and less room to maneuver, rendering religion ever more anachronistic, while at same time it has not found sufficiently adequate substitutes. There are no aspects of society that seem as fulfilling (just compare civil with religious ceremony) or as “whole” as religion. One striking example is death, which religion allows, in fact encourages, the individual to live through a catharsis and thus come to accept the death of a loved one ⁵.

⁵This is the subject for another consideration, but as a brief digression it may well be in order. This, as well as many other aspects of modern society, are also due to a breakdown of the extended family, the clan.

This once gave the individual the sense of belonging to a close knit, protective, group, whose rituals and rites he or she inherited as given, and would only rarely leave. If there was a departure it was perhaps to mix with the acquired clan of a spouse, but still becoming part

It is important, however, to realize that religion's role in the evolution of mankind may have played out its role, and may now, in fact, be a regressive aspect of human nature. It is quite conceivable that, apart from its role as a social cohesive force, the most important role of religion was to provide a kind of assurance for the future. Given the capacity of the individual to think ahead and worry about the future it is quite important to guarantee that a person does not become so apprehensive that they are no longer able to function. Thus religion gives "a purpose" to one's life. It is interesting that when animals are in a state of danger they can acquire certain ritualistic behavior which "wards off" the danger. Certainly, for beings that can plan and imagine future events, the prospect of death would be ever present. Thus a regulatory mechanism to prevent continuous unhappiness would guarantee survival for a society. This tendency has most likely outlived its usefulness. The indifference with which people accept traffic accidents, or living in an earthquake zone, shows how far the "resignation" to fate can go. Unfortunately the present state of the world, ecologically speaking (i.e., over-population, deforestation and dwindling resources) is not something we can allow to continue unchecked. Yet the capacity to accept these imminent dangers, especially when comforted by religious groups (witness the Catholic stance against birth control), does not promise well for the future of mankind.

Certain forms of conduct are perennially open to debate as to whether they are moral. Can killing someone ever be moral, and if so under what circumstances? Are there mitigating circumstances, or perhaps situations where it is excusable if not outright necessary? What about war, self defense or revenge? There are those (perhaps all too few) that do not defend killing under any circumstances, while there are those who defend it for one or more of the circumstance mentioned above. Many considerations change in the course of time. Eliminating unwanted children by placing them on a rock would certainly be condemned by many societies today, and (while less extreme) urinating in public would be frowned upon in some. In modern armies the ancient Greek practice of putting a small pear in oarsmen's mouths so that their screams, while the boats and they burned, would not bother the soldiers probably would not be considered very efficient militarily. Then again, victims are hardly visible in modern warfare. Just think of the trenches which were simply covered over, including the occupants, during the Gulf War. Sometimes aspects that are considered separate issues by some cultures may be interconnected for others. For example being a vegetarian today is (usually) associated with concepts of ecology and pacifism. It would not have been readily associated with these two principles a few centuries ago, perhaps not even as recently as at the beginning of this century.

I must say that despite attempts at being tolerant towards religious beliefs, there are often times that I just cannot understand how *rational* beings can accept a god which is more cruel and insensitive than most perverse adolescents.

of a structure far larger than the individual. Atavistic remnants, such as sports fan and team identification, or extreme forms of nationalism, as well as gang violence, still attest to that form of social structure.

A god who is, by the looks of things, as indifferent to suffering as is possible to imagine. Judging by the standards of traditional religions, god is more interested in the most trivial and absurd practices—such as whether women wear veils, whether one goes to religious services every Sunday, or whether one eats food in a certain order or drags furniture after sundown— than in the deeper attributes— such as whether one cares for the homeless and the aged, about the discriminated or the weak, whether one cares about future generations and the world they will inherit, and about the feelings of those around them.

What afterlife can ever repair the suffering of the countless starving children (need I point them out—the favelas, Biafra, India—to cite only present day examples), women raped in countless wars, of thousands hacked to death, after having seeing their families dismembered? I'm sure I need not go on. There are more savage causes of suffering than any one individual can probably believe, what fictitious heaven can ever repair the damage done to the consciousness of one who has been a victim of such suffering. Even more repugnant, is a god who would permit re-incarnation, is not one life of suffering enough, must one face such cruelty over and over again?

Nature “herself” is ruthless, uncaring of the individual, but a god could not help but be cruel and sadistic if this is the only nature they were capable of devising.

But one does not even need to witness the worst to question the sensibility of a god who would create a world such as ours, It is sufficient to bear the daily turmoils and worries, to live out an existence which is falls so far short of our capabilities, that is the lot of the vast majority of humanity. How many billions who perish without ever having heard of Bach, Newton, Euler or Gödel, let alone sharing in their achievements? What use does god have of masses ignorant of even the rudiments of culture? ⁶ Why does god want those *teeming masses* whose major worry is to make ends meet the end of each month, or where cheaper vegetables may be obtained or if they can manage to get home to watch a football match on television?

Ah, but the answer is so often, that it is our own fault, we have brought this on to ourselves. If this is so, then god metes out justice with the same concern that a butcher has for the sentiments of the calf he is hacking away at. All future unborn children bear the guilt by association, for a crime they cannot even know exists, of a god they most likely will never even hear of? Truly worse than most judicial systems. Mankind has certainly created god in its likeness, vengeful and mean-spirited. Well, not always, some have created an indifferent god, which certainly does not seem to me to be much of an improvement.

To top things off, every religion proclaims itself to be *the true* one, revealed by god him/itself. Certainly they can't be *all* be revealed, so on what basis should one be chosen over another? Almost all religions claim to have miracles, which are sure signs of their being the true faiths. But why does god play with

⁶Let us not forget that whoever reads this belongs most likely to a privileged minority who has probably received sufficient education to ponder some of these questions, but that is not the case for the *vast majority* of humankind.

proofs which are no better than those *proving* the existence of ghosts, UFO's and the Loch Ness monster.

3 Love

Another aspect of the question of ethics is love. It is tightly connected with morality. From "love one's neighbor," love of one's family to the more specific sexual and physical aspects. Related to one of the previous questions, can one claim to love humanity and still kill one's fellow man? Again, as before, we can see that mores and customs change what is ethical and what is not. Can a man love more than one woman at a time (or vice versa)? Is (or was) polygamy better than monogamy, or is it simply different? (Or did it have a certain role in the evolution of mankind?) Is there a social structure in which polygamy is legitimate, or is it always a matter of choice? Can a man who is far older than a woman love her (or, again, vice versa)? Is not the power that an older man may exercise over a young woman unfair to her, especially if she is still an adolescent and still, therefore, developing a personality? Would not any consent on her part be fruit of awe, of subjugation or fantasy rather than of love? These last few questions may be parallel to many situations where a fine line exists between extraction and extortion of sentiments (teacher–student, adult–child or boss–employee).

Not all people would consider love to be an exchange, freely (and therefore knowledgeably) given, between two consenting individuals. Perhaps many would agree that though many things can be obtained through force or seduction, love is not one of them. In some societies a man had to have a woman kidnapped in order to force her to become his bride, not to speak of those where she was raped so that she could only choose between marriage or being outcast, and so it was considered an act of love on the part of the man. When marriages had to be arranged, or when a man seduces a step daughter can we speak of love? Drawing from religious terminology, when does an act cross over from an act of love to an act of lust? What is the cause of "lust," or rather what is it? Where is the line of conflict between a biological drive and a social obligation?

But perhaps none of these questions can be answered without tracing back all the aspects of "love" to their cultural, social and, ultimately, biological origins. Until we have a clearer understanding of human interactions, and psychology can give some insights with a greater scientific basis, we will never be able to speak with any authority regarding morality.

If we look carefully at the list of questions at the opening of this paragraph, we can see that they all depend on what we know of our biological inheritance, on what ethology can tell us. In fact since these processes of human behavior are regulated bio-chemically it may even be important, in order to answer these questions, to understand the chemical aspects behind it. It is high time that we stop those pontificating on these issues based solely on their authority, be it religious or political.

Unfortunately it is a lot easier to speak out on ethical issues based on one's

own prejudices and bias, than to try and get a deeper understanding of human interactions. Until we get an understanding of the causes of perversion, violence and irrational behavior how can we understand what *normal* behavior is? If we do not understand the biochemistry behind homosexuality how can we pronounce judgment on it? If we do not understand the evolution and psycho-social development of marriage, how can we judge, let alone help, couples dealing infidelity, divorce or separation?

Too much weight is given to the “religious” and to the “socio-cultural” interpretation of what is acceptable and what is not. Until we acquire a more rational, scientific outlook, we will be unable to prevent the continuous suffering of individuals, in fact we will do nothing but further continue the very ills we claim to be against.

Evolutionary psychology⁷ seems to indicate that much of what modern society considers positive values are not necessarily part of our “genetic inheritance”. Certainly there are indications that humans tend towards polygamy, and that infidelity was probably more the norm, and that pair bonding probably arose later in human development. What that means is that we have certain “natural” tendencies that served their biological purpose and that we have to learn how to integrate these behavioral traits, and perhaps even overcome them, into a behavior pattern that transcends our origin. For example, if we assume that polygamy was necessary to guarantee the transmission of genes (by the male partner), we would certainly question the need for it in a society where survival is much easier, and the value of one’s genes are not necessarily greater than that of any other. Should we not, however, call into question the ethics of behavior that is sublimates useless⁸ behavior. Continuing with the example, that would mean that perhaps the higher divorce rates of “successful” males is a form of acquiring more female partners (over time). The question is how this affects the children of such couples, a question that would not have arisen in a society where polygamy was practiced.

There is, I believe, no doubt that “love” is a biological reaction,⁹ but this does not mean that we have to bend to its original drives. What we should seek is to use the very drives that spring from these emotions to improve ourselves, our relationships with others. Not just on an individual basis, but perhaps on a higher, social, level.

⁷Sometimes I find it hard to believe that so few choose to be psychologists (or some related discipline) to understand human behavior. Could it be a form of arrogance, where we believe that a scientific inquiry into human behavior is not necessary?

⁸Useless from a biologically point of view, since we are, as individuals, dependent just as much on social structures.

⁹We can safely say it is bio-chemical. This reductionist stance does not, in and of itself, remove from “falling in love” any of its force, nor, for that matter, any of its “poetry”. It should be superfluous to add that even the discovery of the mechanism behind “falling in love” will certainly not prevent one from doing so. One could draw a parallel, knowing that anger increases certain hormones does not mean that we have overcome the need to become angry.

4 Society

Our morality cannot be dichotomized from the bodies which we ourselves are. This means that in order to build up a coherent picture of ethics we must not forget that we are also animals: mammals to be more precise. Mammals have a dominant trait that seems to get stronger the further one goes “up” the evolutionary scale, and that is the need to be in contact with one’s mate, and with one’s parents. In primates and many other mammals the need is not only to be in physical contact with others, but to be caressed and groomed. In social animals, such as the primates, social bonding depends in large part on mutual touch. The very name *mammal* which alludes to breast and drinking milk, actually indicates much more: the need of the young to be touched and cuddled. The experiment with the infant monkey and the two surrogate mothers (one made of wire with a milk bottle attached at the breast level, and the other made of cloth, so that it would be soft and warm, but which had no milk) evidenced what should have been intuitive. The growth of a healthy individual depends on the amount of (physical) attention it gets from its parents. We have a strong need to interact touching and smelling (deodorants notwithstanding).

We need to keep this in mind when we say we are social animals. Societies evolve¹⁰, but if in so doing they allow less and less room for this mammalian aspect, it means they cannot evolve for the better. A society that denies this does not produce angelic beings, but will push its members back towards more primitive individuals (reptilian beings which we will talk about below).

This is because there are two major factors that may at first seem contradictory: realizing what we truly are, our basic “*animality*,” and our striving to be what we are not, tending towards exploration to push the limits of what we can be. Our fundamental aspect (animal, and it is not a coincidence that soul in Latin was called “*animus*”) and our frontiers, intellectually and in movement (speed, distance) towards unknown goals are contradictory only if one believes that to become fully realized we must destroy what we are.

In modern society we can see this constantly. There is a trend which is only apparently towards two irreconcilable directions: one is an ongoing development (in Western culture) towards an ever more technologically oriented individualism (it goes under different names – consumerism, progress, we may look at the subtler differences at another time, which is present not just in industrialized societies, but all societies, which by now have this image of “Western/American/European” lifestyle) and the second towards more deep rooted collective behavior. This is the ever present temptation in humanity to fall back upon its more primitive behavior. The reptile in all of us, as was so aptly described by C. Sagan, which is readily seen in mob behavior. Just witness the rash of racist attacks, the rise of nazi skins in Germany, England or Italy or the fratricidal war in Yugoslavia, or the ongoing progroms against Gypsies in most of Eastern Europe (especially in Romania at the time of writing).

¹⁰Actually it would probably be more accurate to say that societies simply change. Like any complex system, especially social complex systems: economics, politics and legal, there is no evolution towards a stable point.

The first trend may reflect itself in a worship of technology. This is not to be confused with science which aims at understanding the world about us, in understanding ourselves, but technology, which aims at controlling the world: though the distinction may at times become blurred ¹¹. It may reflect itself in a denial of the *animal* instinct, *i.e.*, the need to be touched, the need for company and for pleasures which are not merely intellectual. This rationalization, which also means a rationalization of our lives and our selves. Each one of us is like a piece of the machinery of society. This is actually quite irrational, if we stop to reflect on it for a moment, since we have no idea as to its purpose. It is certainly not “to live better”, though the confusion is, at times, understandable: faster cars, higher quality televisions, louder stereos and long lasting frozen foods are not themselves richer since they are not *contents* but only means ¹².

Stated another way: one already has to have somewhere better to go to (it is not the better car that will improve what you reach when you are there), there has to be something worthwhile to watch (not just real life color soap operas or 3-d commercials) or something worth listening to (just creating louder speaker or with greater quality bass does not improve noise...it's still noise).

This rush towards ever more advanced technology (and then rushing to repair disasters with more technology) is actually a dangerous game which society is playing, both in terms of our environment and of ourselves. Like a child with a revolver in its hands, capable of killing someone, yet not having the slightest idea of the potential danger, simply because the actual meaning of the situation is beyond its comprehension. Just because we know how to build reactors does not mean we understand the consequences of that reactor to the atmosphere, or to the climate, in general. We understand too little of the world around us to be able to foresee the consequence of our actions, let alone to control them. There are far too many examples of man damaging the environment and then trying to repair the damage done, but only able to make matters worse.

In our daily life this rationalization reflects itself in a society aimed at smaller and smaller social units. A three (two and a half) person family is a unit, and each must have—to be fully autonomous: refrigerator, car and television. Food, stored in small convenient packages, quick to cook, are great for a working mother. Cars, two tons of steel, to go back and forth (maybe from home to the car factory and back again) and occasionally on holiday (*en masse*) to some picnic site with the family. Let us pause to think of that for a moment. We accept, as a matter of course, a means of transportation that in Italy alone has wiped out the equivalent of half the population of its capital in ten years (and yet we consider ourselves rational, certainly more rational than *mere* animals).

¹¹When we speak of science we are actually using a very imprecise term. If we mean a discipline where the scientific model is applied then physics is a science, but medicine would only partially be considered one. If we mean a disciplined study with the intent to describe or explore the world about us then the natural sciences, medicine and psychology would most certainly be included.

¹²And it is even more irrational when we realize that it is not necessarily the best products, or most *valuable* that “make it” in the market, since the criteria of what is commercially successful or what technology takes over is not due to intrinsic quality of the merchandise but is regulated by economic factors which are quite unrelated.

And last but not least, in the average family, from New York to Johannesburg, from Tokyo to Mexico City, there is the ubiquitous television set. Sterile (no touch, no smell) images of the average middle class industrialized (sub-urban) dreams, nightmares and fantasies. Instead of raising cultural awareness it is used to drive home the least common denominator of consciousness as a model of behavior. Is it only accidental then that violent death is an integral part of so much of television?

So the violence, the fears, the racism, the phobias and the sexual urges which are seldom spoken about directly are usually relegated to some “higher” authority such as the law, legislators and even the social worker. The taboos are by now stratified, layer upon layer. We are like a family incapable of stopping the ravages of alcohol, drawn down by it, while never daring speak about it.

But how are the “authorities” supposed to handle questions we do not even know exactly how to pose, and which society as a whole is too embarrassed to ponder. Most of the questions that touch upon morality are emotional time-bombs. Just look at abortion. How many are willing to look at it without the security of a religious cult or a political group and face it without pre-conceived bias? This does not mean that one or the other will come away with a different answer, but that they are willing to look at other aspects of the problem, from the point of view of others. But I feel that it is precisely this fear, the fear that someone may realize they have been “wrong” all along that stops us.

It is easy to forget, when one is preaching for the death penalty and stiffer prison terms, that there are other sides to the issue. That other side is that something in society has gone wrong when too many people seek refuge in the good (*us*) vs. bad (*them*) rhetoric. That is not to say that prisons are not necessary or that stern discipline is useless, but rather that it should always be coupled with justice. But then what is justice? Which reminds us of the question: who should bear the responsibility for determining what justice is? And so we are back at the starting point: *What is ethics?*

Can we afford not to know, can we afford putting off trying to find a rational basis for ethics?

5 Animal Rights

One of my principal beliefs is that since I do not believe in souls or afterlife that I value the precious little time we have to live, and each living thing strives in its own way to prolong the little time allotted to it. So I, with the knowledge of the preciousness of this gift called life, do not wish to be cause for taking it away from those creatures that cling to it with no matter how rudimentary a consciousness. All living things are entitled to live life with as little suffering as possible. So humans should strive to respect all living things especially: the weak, the outcast, the elderly, children, animals. and the environment.

In short those that cannot defend themselves against humans. This will be possible if we are to rise above our biological constraints, and behave towards other living things not as though by some god-given divine right or authority

but as towards beings that share our planet.

In my personal life this has meant adopting a vegetarian life style, and support for those groups that act in favor of environmental protection, animal rights and pacifist organizations, as well as supporting those who are victims of violence.

Some, upon hearing the word “vegetarian” react by asking whether or not vegetarians respect plants, or think of the suffering caused to plants. (I will assume that this is brought up in good faith, and not as a provocation.)

One simple argument that implies that in fact “vegetarians” in fact usually are more respectful of plants is not only in that they tend to be more ecologically aware, but also as a direct consequence of their life style which may be schematized as follows:

- life is good
- \Rightarrow we should try and preserve life as much as possible
- \Rightarrow we should kill less
- and since
 - killing only necessary plants for food is less than
 - killing plants(for food and for feed crops, destroying the environment)
+animals (for food and fun)
- \Rightarrow we should:
 - stop killing animals for food and fun
 - stop killing plants for feed crops
 - show greater concern for the environment

It is not a difficult argument to follow, but there are some that claim it is flawed or fallacious. Even in that case it is far better to be responsible for less destruction and suffering through faulty logic, than by sophistry and rhetoric convince oneself that we can go on depleting the world’s ecological systems and biological diversity as we have been doing till now, and remain neutral or indifferent to the suffering caused to animals just for our own added “pleasure”.

It is true that there were societies in which eating an animal, or even a human opponent for that matter, was a *sign of respect*. But then societies change. There were societies that would expose unwanted children to die on a rock, or societies where the aged were left to die a “natural” death. I think few today, in many modern societies, would tolerate that. And yet there are still far too many that cannot accept that we can also change with regard to animals and other living things.

There is more and more evidence that animals do suffer loneliness, isolation, frustration and even lack of intellectual stimulation so we are learning to avoid those things that can cause that suffering. The same thing may be said with

regards to plants: if the environment is polluted, or certain insects and species which are necessary in the cycle of living things in an ecosystem are endangered so are the plants which depend on them. Plants may suffer as well such things as thirst and from lack of nutrients, and so *limiting* those human activities which help to erode the top soil (for example intensive farming especially for feed) can be justified not just from the point of view of preservation of the biosphere, but also as an act of respect towards plants and other living things.

References

- [1] Mario Vaneenchoutte *The memetic basis of religion*. Nature 365, 23 (1993)
- [2] J. Richard Gott III, *Implications of the Copernican principle for our future prospects*. Nature 363, 315 (1993)
- [3] David Archibald, *Were Dinosaurs born losers?* New Scientist 13 Feb. 1993
- [4] L. Partridge & N. H. Barton, *Optimality, mutation and evolution of ageing*. Nature 362, 305 (1993)
- [5] Complexity
- [6] John L. Casti, *Paradigms Lost*. Abacus Books, London 1989
- [7] Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford University Press. Oxford 1978
- [8] Konrad Lorenz, *Behind the Mirror*. 1973 Piper & Co.
- [9] Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity*. Seuil 1970
- [10] Robert, Blumenschine & John A. Cavallo, *Scavenging and Human Evolution*. Scientific American October 1992 Vol. 267, Number 4, 90-96
- [11] Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes, Error and the Future of Human Life*. Scientific American October 1994 Vol. 271, Number 4, 116
- [12] Peter D. Wilson, *Secular Ethics and Animal Rights* . obtained via Internet. One important concept I have borrowed from him is the description of the fairness principle.