

ETHICS AND ENLIGHTENED PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

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Summary

Three decades after the publication of C.West Churchman's main works, it seems necessary to reevaluate his perspective on ethics and to reframe it within the much modified and ever more complex interrelations between the widely different cultures in the world. In fact, his views on ethics are, like everyone's own, culturo-centrated.

On the other hand, it seems obvious – taking particularly in account Magoroh Maruyama's work on "mindscapes" - that different personal psychologies lead to also quite different Weltanschauungen and ethical stands.

Anyhow, in the present dangerously unstable situation of mankind as a whole, only a genuine transcultural ethics can save us from a variety of possible global megacatastrophes, mostly engineered by man himself.

The crucial questions are: Can we hope that such a globally recognized and accepted ethics will emerge in time? And what should be its prescriptions?

Musings about Churchman's views on Ethics

Ethics ?

We should start with the following quotation from "The Design of Inquiring Systems" (p.238);

"The religious Weltanschauung, ... describes a certain kind of relationship – such as love, adoration and obedience – between men and other men, or between men and some superior being. or between men and "Nature"".

To begin with, the religious Weltanschauung does in fact prescribe (not merely describe) certain kinds of relationships. This is specially true in the case of the three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

All three prescribe more or less the same type of behavior, in most cases. But there is a ploy: The "faithful" should only adore the "true" God... and moreover strictly in the specific ways established by the sacred scriptures.

And, in most cases, this love, adoration and obedience is not due to god. when and as described by any other creed, but exclusively to the only "proper" one. Those people who are not regarded as true believers in the "true" God are most generally not loved. No obedience is due to "alien" scriptures and "heretics" are excommunicated.

Indeed, the "infidel", the "pagan" or even simply the non-believer can find himself in dire straits and is frequently marginated or hostigated. He can even be killed, under the most sanctimonious reasons, be it during a crusade, or by an inquisitor, or by some Jihad fighter.

All this is ominous in view of the religious origins of ethics in the cultures that emerged from monotheistic faiths. The case of Eastern creeds, as Hinduism and Buddhism would need a different approach. The first mainly prescribes a rigid and highly fragmented social order, while Buddhism is oriented to personal introspection and betterment.

Ethics, as derived from different religious beliefs, has thus in each case a specific flavor, specially in the Western World.

Why, how and what do we believe

While we are generally unconscious of the deep sources of our individual behavior, it is however evident that our personal ethics largely depends on our own deep-seated – and also very, or more or less, personal *Weltanschauung*. This German term is used here because it is much more significant than the English "worldview". In effect, it conveys the individual attitude oriented **toward** the observation of our environment (*an-schauung*) and generally includes an intentionality, in the meaning of Brentano and Merleau-Ponty. Our outlook is not, and cannot be, neutral or "objective". We depend on what, for the lack of a better term, we should call our "temperament", and moreover, each of us is located within the particular culture he/she was reared in.

M. Maruyama widely explored the resulting behavioral inclinations of different people in varied settings and introduced a classification of so-called individual "mindscapes", after protracted research in many countries and different cultures. The following summary surely does not give full justice – far from it – to the wide embracing views of Maruyama. But it will – hopefully – give us a better understanding of our own psychological and cultural conditioning as observers and – mostly – believers.

Maruyama distinguishes four main types of personal "mindscapes", with the following predominant characteristics:

- H type: Homogeneous – hierarchical - classificational
(The world is organized in a very orderly way, that should be discovered, understood and respected)
- I type: Heterogeneous – independent - random
(Everybody does, or should do, what he/she likes – No very well defined order or organization can be recognized, nor should be imposed, and the general results are mostly random)
- S type: Heterogeneous – interactive – pattern maintaining
(People are different, but they are interacting and the more or less repeated interactions tend to create and maintain specific behavioral patterns)
- G type: Heterogeneous – interactive, pattern generating
(People being different and interactive in different ways, tend to generate new behavioral patterns)

Maruyama freely admits that his classification may not be perfect and that only few individuals may respond to a totally dominant mindscape, absolutely exclusive of some characteristics of another type.

However, admitting these limitations, it seems possible to hypothesize a classification of ethical feelings in correspondance with each type. What follows is of course in no way Maruyama's responsibility.

- H type: We should be respectful of the existing order. This implies mostly rigorous respect of the ethical commandments in force in our society, which leads in many cases to authoritarian attitudes
- I type: Society should not impose us our ethics. Such views liberate creativity. But they can also lead to socially destructive anarchy

- S type: We should find our place, integrating ourselves in social groups through working interactions. Socially oriented ethics seem to become paramount. But this could lead to obdured conservatism and stagnation, once patterns become dominant and self-reproducing.
- G type: The need for adaptivity and evolution – individual as well as social – should be recognized in ethical terms. However, it could be difficult to evaluate the results, also in ethical terms

... And what should we accept as ethics?

It seems obvious that the different attitudes thus described did and do exist in every society at every level. Even Socrates trial, and self-accepted death sentence could be interpreted in terms of ethical conflict between irreconcilable mindscapes.

As we are all reared and educated in some specific culture, we acquire mainly the ethical hereditary Weltanschauung of our forefathers.

This fact leads us to some very awkward question marks:

- If your culture prescribes you some specific behavior, it remains to be seen if:
 - Such behavior should be considered ethical in another cultural setting? (For example, what should you feel about Cruzades, or Jihad, in accordance – or not – with the traditional views of your culture ... or the culture of the "others". Or, what should be in ethical terms, the social status and rights of women... in all cultures?)
 - You will personally accept fully, partly, or not at all such or such prescriptions? (This is for example the case of the conscious objector to military service, or opposition to blood transfusions, in accordance with some heterodox religious beliefs ... but in contradiction to orthodox social obligations or prescriptions)

Still further on, we are confronted with some very uncomfortable options.

Can we all admit eventual universal ethical principles? We all generally admit that human life should be respected. But what should we do if we are mandated for patriotic reasons to kill "ennemies" in war. And what would these "ennemies" do in turn?

And can we hope that a planetary ethics could emerge, and what should it prescribe? Which agreements and obligations could be stated and enforced, for example about the individual and nationally collective plundering of natural ressources in non-sustainable conditions? What should we make, in ethical terms of Garrett Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons" or John Lovelock's "Gaia"?

It seems obvious that these intricated questions cannot be resolved as long as individuals in all the different cultures of this world remain blind to any view seemingly incompatible with the dominant prescriptions of their own culture.

This implies one of the most critical jump in mankind's history. We cannot anymore afford the mere existence of six billions blind cultural parrots in a world burdened with nuclear weapons and tinkering with genetic engineering. Massive and collective irresponsibility – or even simply non-responsibility – could easily drive mankind to global suicide.

Considering the limits of multiple and many times divergent traditional ethics based on particular cultural Weltanschauungen, we need a massive mutation of all individuals toward a vision of ethics in terms of personal responsibility. This is for sure a tall order... which brings us back to Churchman.

In a review of “The systems approach and its enemies” (1980), John van Gigch quotes Churchman’s phrase: “The visionary must at one and the same time live his vision and the reality of the collective conscious”

This is in good accordance with a Japanese saying: “Vision without action is a dream, action without vision is a nightmare”

The main point seems finally to be in the quality of the “vision”: action based on an incorrect vision could lead to a still more horrendous nightmare.

Possibly we would have to replace the “visionary” by a helmsman (“Kybernetes”!) who should be first of all a very able watchman. The ideal watchman tries to see what other people do not (or not yet) perceive. To be good at this, he should have a correct (i.e. working) model of what he is witnessing ...and a clear awareness of his own way of perception.

He should moreover correct his model every time some discrepancy emerges between his model and the perceived reality (as proposed by Stafford Beer in his famous lecture on “The surrogate world we manage”)

Wishful thinking, self-righteousness or an illuminist stand would not help. On the contrary, it could lead the “visionary” very much astray.

In relation to such views, two different currents of thought do run through West Churchman’s work.

The first starts from a deep preoccupation with morality and ethics and the second one defines ways for constructing systems models and designing inquiring systems, obviously as a springboard for sound management.

As to morality and ethics, to begin with, we should not confuse both, as they are very different sources of “oughtness” (A. Bahm), i.e. what “should” be, or “should” be done.

Morality would merely be the acceptance and respect of a code of rights and duties as prescribed in a specific culture by religious belief, by law or by custom.

These prescriptions- and their practical effects (as we are now more and more aware of)- can be widely different from one culture to another. Such is the case for example in matter of social status (aristocracies, castes, women’s rights, etc.) ; access to priesthood and exercise of the same; money lending and many other matters and behaviors.

Some examples and comments may be useful.

An extreme case are the situations in which one human being is supposed to have the right- or even the duty- to kill other human beings, acting for example as a public executioner, or in war as a soldier, or even maybe when murdering a “tyrant”

Any such behavior that does not fly in the face of culturally acceptable values and norms can thus be condoned.

Ethics prescribes a different kind of oughtness in which the individual is supposed to assume personally the responsibility of his behavior, in accordance with his own informed judgement.

This is of course much more tricky, as for example in the border case of the murder of the “tyrant”. The quote marks imply the personal and decisive judgement about the perverse nature of the “tyrant”...Such an opinion is quite subjective and would possibly not be admitted by many other people...whose views are of course subjective as well.

This means that the base for ethics is not merely obedience to the law, custom, etc..., but necessarily “well informed judgement”. And it is, of course, quite difficult to reach such

judgement. Moreover, it is still generally much more difficult to convince everybody else that this judgement is really sound and fair -not to speak about the liars, scoundrels or simply stupid people who would not or could not accept it, for their own biased reasons or unreasons (...just as we ourselves and our ways may seem questionable to them!)

This problem-already quite uncomfortable in itself- can be hopelessly complicated in specific present or future socio-cultural situations. This fact is duly acknowledged by West Churchman, for example in "Thought and Wisdom"

Mass killings, as in WW1 and WW2, were widely admitted until recently as being of course very unfortunate, but anyhow an unavoidable aspect of international relations.

Only that the virtuously named "rules of war" should be respected (and if not, "that's really too bad, but what could be done!?!")

Such collective and horrendous mass human sacrifices of innocents by other innocents were waged from all sides under the invocations of "patriotic defense of one's country, of civilization, freedom, democracy, true faith, culture, etc..."

We should meditate the recent comment of a german veteran of WW2 at the 60th anniversary of the 6th of June 1944 D.Day, when he met an american veteran, also about 80 years old. Both discovered that they were probably firing at each other in the same spot on D.Day. He said "We were praying, praying... but still relentlessly trying to kill each other"

What a pathetic confession and how significant for one like this author, who was not so far away from these Norman beaches at that time.

As a consequence, I am obliged to confess that I feel quite uneasy with preachers of any denomination, as well as with so-called "practical" people. We should be suspicious about qualifying (or disqualifying) adjectives as "acceptable, satisfying, or negative, unsustainable" and...unfortunately "moral" or "ethical" or their opposites, so frequently used in dubious ways by dubious people.

All of these judgements, implicit in the wordings, are ultimately based on criteria. And criteria are subjectively accepted (or rejected) by individuals whose information and judgements are poor, even when they are honest and well-intentioned. As noted by Churchman, thought is not enough; wisdom should be sought.

Consequently, it must be admitted that religious and ethical values and norms, imperfectly as they are invoked at time, are still the best behavioral rules currently available, as the result of a millenary experience of social life.

They should not be simply thrown overboard. In fact, social exercise of rationality is still a quite new endeavor, whose results have not always been very encouraging. But we should now look farther away.

West Churchman saw the problem. He wrote for example in "Thought and Wisdom" (p.19): "Is it possible to secure improvement in the human condition by means of the human intellect?"

Of course, he himself widely contributed to enlighten this intellect. But the answer to his query depends widely of the understanding and diffusion of his work, as done by his disciples.

He described in "Thought and Wisdom" how unilateral approaches to human problems in their merely technical aspects, lead to lopsided illusory "solutions"

Even brilliant physicists, biologists or engineers, able to solve difficult theoretical or practical problems related to matter, energy and physiology, are short in many cases of a minimum understanding of individual and collective human conundrums and quandaries.

As men are not quarks, nor electric motors, nor even rabbits, the quality and type of intellect and knowledge needed for the understanding and management of human affairs, are definitely different from any specific technical knowledge.

It is the honor of Churchman to have searched and deepened the “Systems Approach”, explaining clearly to anybody who would care to listen, how coherent (and frequently ignored) interrelations arise and how important they are.

He would, and possibly did agree with Thomas S. Eliot’s comment: “Where is the knowledge we lost with information? And where is the wisdom we lost with knowledge?”

All his long career has been dedicated to elaborate better structured ways to knowledge and wisdom.

Let us all be grateful.

But let us also admit that ethics is a permanent and responsible construct for each of us and not only a collection of stale recipes.

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