

# Bioethics: A Philosophical Basis for Moral Decisions

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I would like to address myself not to a specific moral problem caused by the proliferation of scientific knowledge and technological advances in our culture, but to the underlying philosophical basis for the plethora of moral dilemmas we are witnessing. In essence, I am saying that the ecological and psychosocial problems of today cannot be ameliorated by recycling pop bottles or training more psychiatrists. We must attack the cause not the symptoms. The cause, I propose, resides in our head in the form of a bankrupt philosophy of human nature. Moreover, I make the assumption, as others have<sup>123</sup> that each individual holds a view of human nature which shapes policies and practices of human intervention which, in turn, influence biological and psycho-social development.

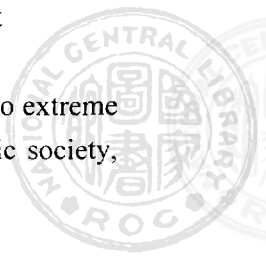
I tend to agree with F.S.C. Northrop's analysis of contemporary moral problems. In essence, he states that our problems are rooted in a view of the human-nature relationship which is dualistic in holding that the means of technological advance can be derived from nature, but the ends which direct them, cannot<sup>4</sup>.

Moreover, James Drane, a contemporary philosopher has stated, "Every ethic is founded in a philosophy of human nature and every philosophy of human nature points towards ethical behavior"<sup>5</sup>. If this is true, and I believe it is, then the apparent inability to resolve many of our contemporary and future medical-moral dilemmas stems from the fact that our culture lacks a meaningful view of human nature which would naturally breed humane moral values to govern our science and technology.

Leon Eisenberg, a Harvard psychiatrist, emphasizes the important role culture has in shaping our moral behavior when he stated:

The planets will move as they always have whether we adopt a geocentric or a heliocentric view of the heavens. It is only the equations we generate to account for those motions that will be more or less complex, the motions of the planets are sublimely indifferent to our earth-bound astronomy. But the behavior of man is not independent of the theories of human behavior that men adopt<sup>6</sup>.

When we examine the ethical options we have for moral behavior, we note easily two extreme positions exemplified by Maoist-China, on one hand, and a laissez-faire capitalistic society,



such as the United States, on the other. From a biological standpoint, a priori-absolute ethics (cultural monism) and laissez-faire-relativistic ethics ("do your own thing") are culturally non-adaptive. Neither one takes into account the realities of human nature.

Jacques Monod, in his *Chance and Necessity*, clearly describes what is wrong in our technological West when he stated,

For their moral bases the 'liberal' societies of the West still teach or pay lip-service to—a disgusting farrago of Judeo-Christian religiosity, scientific progressivism, belief in the 'natural' rights of man, and utilitarian pragmatism<sup>7</sup>.

From the preceding, I believe it is clear that our task, although immense, if not impossible, is to impart culturally, scientifically-grounded views of human nature into religious, economic and political institutions, such that moral values will not be in ignorance of or in defiance of the biological realities of human nature (Bioethics). In essence, this is what Daniel Callahan of the Hastings Center was calling for when he stated:

To build a fresh ethic for the life sciences is to build a cultLife<sup>8</sup>.

Anything short of that will fail. I cannot help recall also what John Dewey once said:

A culture which permits science to destroy traditional values but which distrusts its power to create new ones is destroying itself.

At this point, let me stress that I am not saying that science can determine which values are right or wrong ("so-called Naturalistic Fallacy"—that the "ought" can be derived from the "is"), but that no human values can be maintained in ignorance or in defiance of the "is".

Max Otto, a philosopher, pointed this out nicely when he stated that the universe is run by natural forces and laws, not by moral laws. However, human societies which live in the natural world must live by moral laws. If those moral laws contradict or ignore the nature laws, it will be the human societies, not the physical universe, which suffer the consequences of such defiance<sup>10</sup>.

Moreover, I believe, as does John Tonsor, that:

If we are to act ecumenically let us begin not with theology but with ethics. Let us put ethics at the center of our undergraduate curricula and stress the ethical implications of all post-secondary education whether it is broadly humanistic or narrowly vocational. If we cannot agree on how to act there is little hope that we shall agree on what we are to believe"

The following models of human nature are an attempt to provide such an understanding of ourselves that specific moral problems will be resolved in such ways as to minimize human suffering and to maximize the generation of human values which will enhance survival of the human species, quality of life of the whole society and the enhancement of the human potential for each individual<sup>12,13</sup>.



## Scientific Views of Human Nature

### 1. *Nature and Nurture Model:*

Ashley Montagu's statement accurately describes this model: "Heredity, then, is the expression, not of what is given in one's genes at conception, but of the reciprocal interaction between the inherited genes and the environment to which they've been exposed"<sup>14</sup>.

### 2. *Hierarchical View of Human Nature:*<sup>15</sup>

Here, E. Laszlo, a systems philosopher, describes this model: "First, we are a collection of natural systems, living things second, thirdly human beings, members of a society and culture fourth, and unique individuals fifth"<sup>16</sup>.

### 3. *Cybernetic View of Human Nature:*<sup>17</sup>

Norbert Wiener provides us with the insight for this model: "We have modified our environment (physical and abstract) so radically that we must now modify ourselves in order to exist in this new environment"<sup>18</sup>.

### 4. *Symbolic View of Human Nature:*<sup>15</sup>

E. Cassirer's statement accurately portrays another aspect of human nature: "Man is... no longer a physical universe, man lives in a symbolic (abstract or ideological) universe"<sup>20</sup>.

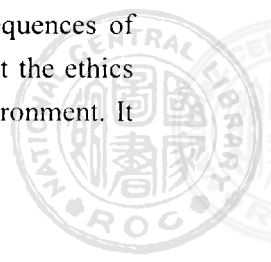
### 5. *Evolutionary View of Human Nature:*<sup>21</sup>

H. Morowitz, a molecular biologist, conceptualizes this view in this way: "For not only is man himself a part of nature, a naked ape in the current idiom, but he is a naked ape in a universe that is decaying to a homogenized nothingness. Any philosophy of man or any theology which is not adjusted to this particular loss of innocence is simply ignoring the intellectual scientific milieu in which modern man must function"<sup>22</sup>.

## Bioethics

With these models of human nature at the focus of our consciousness, we can now, I believe, understand that there is a philosophical option to ethical monism and ethical laissez-faire relativism. And that would be Bioethical pluralism<sup>23</sup>. In essence, it states that science and technology can contribute to moral resolutions in three levels: (1) options; (2) predictions of the consequences of these options; (3) understanding our biological nature and the consequences of the different value choices. It forces us to explicate our values and it helps us understand which values maximize or minimize, in any particular case, human survival and the quality of life.

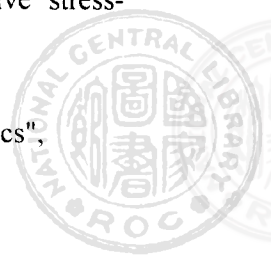
A true deep and global bioethical philosophy must take into account the latest scientific view of human nature. It must also be encompassing, in that it integrates the consequences of human decisions on the whole human-biological eco-system. Bioethics is not just the ethics of medical interventions. It is not just the ethics of human decisions on the environment. It



must strive for a sustainable and stable biosphere<sup>24,25</sup>. Human nature has both a genetic and cultural component. Human genetics makes human consciousness possible. Human consciousness makes possible an almost Infinite number of cultural environments. However, because the genetic component of human nature is rather limited in comparison to the conscious component, it is imperative that the cultural manifestations of our consciousness (which Includes our ethical and moral concepts) take into account the aforementioned realities of our human nature.

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