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Bioethics

A panorama of the human being's ethical relations with animals and plants

by Fritz Jahr

The clear distinction between animal and human being, valid from the beginning of our European culture to the end of the 18th century, cannot be maintained today. Up to the French Revolution, the Europeans wanted the knowledge unification of religious, philosophical and scientific worlds. However, after such event and pressured by the huge amount of knowledge, we had to give up this unification.

Modern Natural Sciences will always be given credit for the fact of having enabled an unprejudiced consideration of the world events. Today, we would not be searching for the truth if we denied the results from experiences with animals, blood tests, serology and many others. On the other hand, we cannot deny that exactly these scientific triumphs of the human spirit have taken from the human the domain position in the world as a whole. Philosophy, which previously prescribed its essential ideas to the Natural Sciences, then needed to build its own systems based on particular ideas from the Natural Sciences. Thus, that was simply a poetic-philosophical formulation of Darwin's ideas when Nietzsche considered human as an inferior stage in transition to a superior stage, as an "extended rope between animal and superman".

What was the result of this reversal? First, the fundamental equivalence between man and animal as an object of Psychology study, which is not any longer limited to man, but uses the same methods in the animal field and, as there is an anatomical-zoological comparative study, very clarifying comparison are likewise done between animal and human souls. Plant Psychology sketches can already be seen, whose most famous representatives are: G. Th. Fechner, in the past, and R. H. Francé, Ad. Wagner and the Indian Bose, today. This way, modern Psychology takes all living beings into its study limits. Under these circumstances, the fact that R. Eisler speaks of Biopsychology (study of all living beings' souls) is only a direct consequence.

From Biopsychology to Bioethics just one step is required, the acceptance of moral obligations to all living beings, not only in relation to humans. By no means, Bioethics is not objectively a discovery of the present. One interesting example of the past is the image of Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), who, with his great love for animals, his welcoming sympathy for all living beings, was a precursor of Rousseau's exaltation of all nature centuries later.

When the European unified view of the world was pulled down around the end of the Baroque period, the intellectual life in the continent was, for the first time, ready to be influenced by distinct ideas with no prejudice. The open spirit of Herder, that maybe at that time had the best intuition of what was about to come, expected that Man, following the deity example that everything can penetrate with the feeling, transfer himself to each creature and feel together with it when needed. This idea leads us to the Indian view, which was being discovered by England. However, it was only during the Romanticism period that India could find a solid ground in Europe and in its most important region at the time: Germany. The soul migration doctrine, developed in India, also influenced the schools' thought of Indian philosophers, mainly Santhya followers. From this school, Yoga doctrine is distinct, and studies the most rigorous consequences of such ideas. Yoga followers cannot, under any circumstance, live on other creatures; above all, they should not kill animals and should consume plants only under certain conditions. They should keep a handkerchief to cover the mouth and prevent a microscopic living being from dying when taking in oxygen; for the same reason, they should also filter drinking water and cannot take a bath. The attempt to preserve any living being for his/her own self-preservation still leads some Indians to feed on horse dung. If in this context Buddha is naturally mentioned, it should also be noted that the Buddhism founder himself refused to adopt the fanatic self-sacrifices from Yoga. Buddha prescribes the abstention from animal foods, but allows vegetables in great proportions. The incorporation of Buddha and his belief in soul migration is demonstrated to us, the Europeans, in a very beautiful manner, through the collection of Jatakas, Buddhist stories about a former birth of Gautama Buddha, where he mentioned that he had not lived only as a man, but also under other forms, such as an elephant, a gazelle, a crab, etc.. These stories, which transmit the idea that the human has an essential link with all creatures, may even show superior beauty if compare to Francis of Assisi' experience.

These lines of ideas led to analogous ideas in the European intellectual life that can be seen in the Romanticism period, although originally very subtle. Theologian Schleiermacher (1768-1834) qualified as immoral that life and creation, wherever they meet, i.e., also in the case of animals and plants, were destroyed with no justified reason for that. The same idea is defended by philosopher Krause, a contemporaneous follower of Schleiermacher, who teaches that every living being should be respected as such and cannot be destroyed worthlessly, as all of them, plants and animals, as well as people, have equal rights, although not to the same things, but every one to what is assumed as necessary within each one's determination reach. Philosopher Schopenhauer, openly invoking the Indian ideas, considered, as a special quality of his Ethics, the fact of having claimed also to animals the feeling of compassion. By Richard Wagner, who is strongly influenced by Schopenhauer and a passionate defender of animals and their protection, these ideas became a common asset to a broader group of people.

This way, regarding animals, the moral claim have become uncontestable, at least in terms of not making them suffer unnecessarily. It is not the same with plants. It seems to be absurd to some people at first that we should also keep some ethical obligations with them. Paul (the Apostle) already had led our sensitivity towards animals and plants. The apotheosis and excitement in the third act of Parsifal, by Richard Wagner, correspond to that idea. With devoted kindness, the man respects at least on Holy Friday the stalk and its flower in the mountains with calm walk to not destroy them. But also in the reflections on plant Ethics of a philosopher as lucid as

Ed. von Hartmann, who died twenty years ago, we can find similar ideas. In an article on flower, he writes about a picked flower: "It is an organism injured to death, whose colors are just not ruined, the head still living and smiling, separated from a body. - When I see the rose in a vase with water or arranged in a bouquet, then I can't avoid the repugnant idea that the human killed one life in the form of a flower just to make such death bring something to feel pleased, a view sufficiently cruel that does not allow to feel the intentional death under an apparent life".

Most people are naturally not so sensitive as Ed. von Hartmann. Everyone knows that plants are also living beings that are injured when the flower is cut, but the idea that it also feels resentful at that is not familiar to us. The awareness of a plant's soul has not been radically transmitted to us. Besides, we know flowers also wilt and dry at the plant and so we do not have any objection to cutting the flowers when they are cultivated for such purpose.

Our assumptions are completely different from those of the Indian fanatics, who do not accept any living being to be touched. Our social order laws and determinations for the protection of plants or flowers isolated in a certain region (for instance, alpine plants) are also based on a completely different view: The social order wants to preserve these plants to prevent their destruction in the region and then they can be a pleasure to humans. If a plant is available in sufficient quantity, the State does not think of protecting it for its isolated value.

Our animal protection view is also based on very different assumptions from those that guided the Indians' behaviors. If we see in the novel by Richard Voß "The holy hatred" how an untouchable man, i.e., a member of a despised caste, does not even accept to kill a poisonous snake, as "snakes are also our brothers and sisters", then we cannot understand this feeling and, on the contrary, we consider this is our right to kill pernicious animals whenever we can. Besides, we permit that household animals to be killed by slaughterhouses and inoffensive wild animals to be the target of hunters because we want to consume their meat, a product that some people around us believe it is indispensable, while tropical countries offer abundant vegetable foods.

Our concept of animal protection has a limit in the utility viewpoint, which is solemnly ignored by the Indians. We feel satisfied as we avoid at least the unnecessary suffering of the animals. Unfortunately, the legal determinations to avoid or punish such torture are far from being enough in many cultures.

But we are on the way to progress. The animal protection gains increasing importance and more adepts, and any self-respecting person today reacts when seeing a silly person inadvertently cutting off flowers on the way with the walking stick or when children pull them out and throw them away some steps afterwards. Our education has greatly progressed in this aspect, but we have to achieve the point when our actions will have the good sense towards the bioethical imperative that says:

Respect every living being essentially as an end in itself and treat it as such if possible!