



Pandemic 2020: Rethinking Ethical Questions

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Abstract

Aim: *The aim of the paper is to emphasize the ethical aspects of material and scientific progress led by the globalization of capitalism, in the wake of the crises of the Corona Pandemic. The globalized transnational negotiations based on material development and progress have left out of the account anthropogenic damage to the planet. This paper argues that every action should be weighed in terms of the extent to which any new discovery or invention can affect all forms of life, including the non-human. Several debates have been at centre-stage regarding ecological damage, climate change and appropriation of shrinking resources in a world involved in the business of profit and loss, without counting the cost to the rest of the world or ecosystem. For a long time, ethical debate has*

been side-lined in favor of material gain. The present crisis demands that the ethical question be expanded to include the planet and all forms of life.

Methodology and Approach: *The study is based on ethics. Ethics traditionally deals with human well-being, and discusses the nature of "individual" good, the nature of "social" good and the relation between these. The concepts of "individual good," "social good" and "right" and "wrong;" and individualism and well-being of the planet, need to be revisited in view of anthropocentric destruction at present times.*

Outcome: *This paper attempts to emphasize two major ideas: the ethical questions that should shape our interaction with other human beings; and the ethics that should impact our interaction with the world around us. The brief study uses the philosophic ideas about ethical conduct that includes the human as well as the non-human; the organic and the inorganic, to create an ethos of care that would help to stop the anthropogenic extinction that threatens the planet, such as the Pandemic has demonstrated.*

Conclusion and Suggestion: *The paper concludes with the idea that the last few centuries have initiated and perpetuated a consumerist race for material possessions at an unprecedented level. This has been exacerbated by the growing levels of population, putting an irreversible strain on the planetary resources putting into jeopardy the future of the coming generations. An ethics of rightness for the group practiced at the individual level seems one difficult but worthwhile way out. Such a course correction would be the one good that would mitigate the infinite suffering of those who faced the worst effects of the Pandemic.*

Keywords: Ethics, capitalism, globalization, pandemic, well-being, forms of life, Anthropocene

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This paper argues that every action should be weighed not in terms of profit and loss but also ethically in terms of the extent to which any new discovery or invention can affect life, not only human, but all life, including non-human. The world has been quietly sliding to a point of no return and several debates have been at centre-stage regarding this (Angus, 2016; Denny, 2017; Fremaux, 2019; Reiss, 2019). The globalised transnational negotiations have been based on material development and progress without taking into account the cost in terms of anthropogenic damage to the planet (Moore, 2016; Figueroa 2017; DeLoughrey, 2019; Hornborg 2019). There have been discussions and summits on climate change, ecology, the Global south and the Global north, colonisation, neo-colonialism, cloning, genetically modified plants, and organ transplant, to name a few (See: Leonardi, 2012; Mezzadra, 2013; Lee, 2013; Field, 2014; Dillon, 2015; O’Lear, 2015; Lawrence, 2017). Issues of war and peace have been converted into negotiations, the race for arms and biological warfare have once again reared their heads in the covid-19-ridden world (Nyquist 1999; Qiao, 2002; Koblenz, 2011; Enemark, 2017; Flora, 2019; Kucharski, 2020; Meena, n. a.).

For a long time, ethical debate has been side-lined in favour of material gain. Ethics traditionally deals with human well-being, and discusses the nature of “individual” good, the nature of “social” good and the relation between these. The present crisis demands that the ethical question be expanded to include the planet and all forms of life. It is the ethical motives that exist for the individual to pursue “social good”, or to whatever is “morally right,” and explore the relation between “pleasure” and “good,” and duty and moral obligation (Bennett, 1984; Bowie, 2004; Duignan, 2011). Even as the world moves from expansion towards a new

narrowing of borders in reaction to the pandemic, it is important to retrieve the ethical foundations that can make life and death more meaningful and worthy.

In philosophy, ethics is the attempt to offer a rational response to the question of how humans should best live. In his simple introduction to *Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*, Simon Blackburn makes a distinction between the physical environment and the moral or ethical environment, which is “the surrounding climate of ideas about how to live” (1). These include the ethical motives that exist for the individual to pursue “social good”, or do whatever is “morally right,” and explore the relation between “pleasure” and “good,” and duty and moral obligation.

As Blackburn points out, it is not that people do not think. It is primarily because they think that questions of right and wrong arise. However, the danger lies in the fact that “we may not be aware of our ideas” because “an idea...is a tendency to accept certain routes of thoughts and feeling” that we may not be aware of or recognize in ourselves (p. 3). He contends that there is always present an ethical climate in which one’s values are shaped, whether one is aware of this or not. The Corona epidemic, the first major biological threat at a global scale in the last hundred years has forced us to ask questions and find answers to issues that were staring us in our face but were being ignored in the everyday existentialist routine.

The ethical climate for the last twenty-five hundred years has been shaped primarily by humans. In the west, it has been influenced by the belief that man is the master of the world that has been created by God for the humans. This belief has led the human to value herself over all other forms of life, plant or animal. The Ethics that have governed human behaviour since classical times are based on man as the centre of creation, who controls all other life forms. This paper then attempts to emphasise two major ideas: the ethical questions that should shape our

interaction with other human beings; and the ethics that should impact our interaction with the world around us.

Ethics, according to Aristotle is a practical science. Practical sciences are connected with action, or more precisely with “how we ought to act in various circumstances, in private and in public affairs” (Barnes 40). His *Ethics* then deals with the individual action and character, and his *Politics* with the behaviour of the actions of state. Aristotle regarded ethics and politics as two related but separate fields of study, since ethics examines the good of the individual, while politics examines the good of the City-State, which he considered to be the best type of community. The ethical dilemma that we are faced with is how to follow a line of action at an individual level that would bring “happiness and wellbeing” to the individual and also contribute to the good of society and state. An added dimension is the realisation that man is not inseparable from ‘nature’ or other forms of life on earth and every human action has succeeded in affecting the balance of life, climate and well-being of the planet.

While Ethics was a valuable science that sought to put good, beauty and well-being as the desirable goal of human beings, it developed in relatively simpler political units where the consequences of any individual action could be related more immediately. The classical trilogy by Aeschylus, *Oedipus Rex* unfolds such an instance where a moral transgression by a young Oedipus causes famine and plague in Thebes. In a bizarre series of events, Oedipus kills his real father, King Laius, who has abandoned him as an infant. As the slayer of the reigning king, he attains the throne of Thebes and as per the norms of the kingdom marries Queen Jocasta who is his natural mother. This incest, though unintentional causes the plague and Oedipus has to atone for it to restore Thebes to health and prosperity. Any epidemic, and in this case, the Pandemic that has devastated human life across the globe, similarly points at the perversion or disrespect for planetary and natural laws.

The problem with the pandemic today is the sheer expanse of its reach. This is not a plague of a city state but of a globalised world. Globalisation that has meant an integrated network of economic, political and cultural exchange (Benyon & Dunkerley, 2000; Wells, et al. 2001; Chang, 2003; Schirm, 2007; Steger, 2017; Ritzer & Dean, 2019). Steger defines globalisation as, “the expansion and intensification of social relations and consciousness across world-time and world-space” and posits that globalisation involves both the ‘macro-structures of a ‘global community’ and the micro- structures of ‘global personhood’ “(15). The globalized world then has run itself into a place where the sheer magnitude of communication networks is working against it. It is like when one’s own body cells mutate and rebel against and begin to kill the healthier cells. So, while the globalised humanity could co-operate in creating networks of co-operation for economic purposes why did it fail to co-operate in a global crisis which affected not one region or state but the whole world. It is this failure that seeks an answer in the intricacies of human negotiations and engagement that have somewhere left behind the practical concept of drawing a balance between individual good and the good of all. This is another way of affirming the engagement of the individual with the society and the world in every way, personal and public. At the individual level then if humans have co-operated to bring about great progress in health, technology, food science and creation of wealth then is it the state that has not played its part?

Steger points out that globalisation requires the “intensification and expansion of political interrelations across the globe” which involves “the growing impact of inter-governmental organisations requiring evolution of political arrangements” that are trans-national. The massive exchange of goods, knowledge, capital and human resources across the globe has succeeded in making a more unified political system where sovereign governments need to co-operate and grow beyond territorial boundaries both physical and psychological

(Hannerz, 1996; Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Robinson, 2003; Willis & Yeoh, 2004; Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Goebel & Schabio, 2013). While the shifting of populations has been seen as a paradigmatic shift in the evolution of humans into world citizens, the democratic governments of the world have regressed into the protectionism of the bounded nation-state. Steger refers to some commentators on globalisation who suggest that “globalisation is actually accentuating people’s sense of nationality” (60-61). While the hyperglobalizers proclaim the demise of the nation, globalised sceptics insist on the continued relevance of the state, the nation, but concede the growing power of global cities (Steger 65-66). Nevertheless, the inability of nations to control movements of men and capital after the neoliberal trade agreements of the 1980s and 1990s has been demonstrated by the current crisis (Atasoy, 2009; Steger, & Roy, 2010; Bowles, et al. 2013). While nation-states have tightened their control over citizens to control the flow of capital and implemented several security measures in order to “fight” international terrorism, they have failed to secure the safety and health of their citizens, while wilfully jettisoning the migrant populations who were lately valuable human capital.

The idea of an ethical state is the least credible of our combined and globalised utopias. In fact, Wallerstein’s “World-systems” suggests a world economic system in which some countries benefit while others are exploited. However, the total inability of powerful states like the US and developed nations of the European Union to take care of the “individuals” who make up their nation and the migrants who “construct” their nation cannot but be the loss of all ethical principles of governance. As Ranajit Guha put it. “Migrant woes are the ‘greatest manmade tragedy’ in India since Partition” (*The Hindu*, 24.5. 20). In her article, “The Pandemic is a Portal,” in *Financial Times*, Arundhati Roy ponders the subtle ways in which the world has changed for us. She finds in the spread of the virus, the same dilemma of right or wrong:

The virus has moved freely along the pathways of trade and international capital, and the terrible illness it has brought in its wake has locked humans down in their countries, their cities and their homes. But unlike the flow of capital, this virus seeks proliferation, not profit, and has, therefore, inadvertently, to some extent, reversed the direction of the flow. It has mocked immigration controls, biometrics, digital surveillance and every other kind of data analytics, and struck hardest — thus far — in the richest, most powerful nations of the world, bringing the engine of capitalism to a juddering halt. Temporarily perhaps, but at least long enough for us to examine its parts, make an assessment and decide whether we want to help fix it, or look for a better engine.

The crisis then takes us to the issue of the suffering of the poor and the working classes, including skilled and professional workers due to the control of capital and resources hands by a few (Smiley, 2002; Graeff & Mehlkop, 2008; Blaney, 2010; Hilary, 2013; Watson, 2015; Burt, 2019; Ayres, 2020). The debate of private ownership versus public ownership has been raised by economists in the interest of equitable distribution of resources (Vickers & Yarrow, 1988; Roland, 2008). Democratic political units are meant to speak for the people, yet there is the unspoken fear of being thought unpatriotic to be speaking out against the governments. There has been a disquieting erosion of public spirit in times of globalisation (Basu, 2008; Alexander, 2010). This is what takes one to another fundamental question of modern times: the ethical dimension of liberty and equality. It is individual liberty that has brought the world to such levels of wealth in the last three centuries. The free trade and unchecked, rather rewarded individual enterprise have hindered the growth of the second ideal of modernity, i.e., equality. Yuval Harari argues persuasively that all man-made order, such as cultures or political objectives are dynamic and full of internal contradictions and

therefore, “cultures are constantly trying to reconcile these contradictions...” (pp. 163-165). He argues that though the concepts of liberty and equality are seen as fundamental values in the modern world yet the two are “contradictory.” Individual freedom, free enterprise, ownership precludes the assurance of equal rights. At the same time taking away individual liberties also may not ensure prosperity. Taking examples from literature he posits that:

Anyone who has read a novel by Charles Dickens knows that the liberal regimes of nineteenth century Europe gave priority to individual freedom even if it meant throwing insolvent poor families in prison and giving orphans little choice but to join schools for pickpockets. Anyone who has read Alexander Solzhenitsyn knows how communism’s egalitarian ideal produced brutal tyrannies that tried to control every aspect of daily life. (165)

Thus, he concludes that the modern world has failed to deal with these contradictions, but this is inevitable and these contradictions will lead the world towards change. The change should now be towards a global people’s affirmation to reconcile the two in some way. The desire for supremacy in economic and military terms has caused a calamitous unnatural and man-made virus to wipe out the others. Global co-operation has sunk into lethal competition. This toxic, hyper masculinity of nations militates against the ethics of nurture. The “well-being” of “us” depends on the “well-being” of them would be an ethical position. The freedom to own and to share can be made into the next global aspiration. It is a matter of shifting the gaze from us towards all; from the human to the rest of the planet.

Science has allowed us to explore ways of increasing our knowledge, resources, energy so that equitable access to resources would not be a give and take of exploitative relations but a realised goal for everyone. But, as Harari (2015) suggests in *Homo Deus*, “the real nemesis of the modern economy is

ecological collapse... an ecological meltdown will cause economic ruin, political turmoil..." (249). He adds that slowing the "pace of progress and growth" and globalised businesses should learn to be satisfied with lesser returns over longer periods (Harari, 2015). Even six months back this suggestion would have been rejected as "heretical," but today, as the epidemic has forced us to standstill, fear the loss of financial security and has made us live without certain habitual rituals that we had begun to consider necessities, it seems like the answer to the threat to life and liberty. Corona made the entire humanity realize that they can curtail their elaborate indulgences and live a 'minimal life' (Becker, 2012; Olivia, 2020).

Ethics does not always mean duty, sacrifice, pain or loss of liberty. It is the "pleasure" that comes from a release from the fear and insecurity of being alone in an uncaring world. Several practical activities as decreed by Aristotle can be undertaken to change the direction of man and machine of production towards essentials rather than spend time, years, human resource and sacrifice ecological balance for the continuation of non-essentials (though there will always be the danger of individual will and liberty!). Some of these could be finding ways to protect the ozone layer and use global networks to provide answers and not private players whose products may be threatened. At the same time, more resources should be devoted to creating better sunscreen to prevent skin cancer and for the training of prevention and treatment of related health issues. Real estate can be globally monitored rather than be used to downgrade rival markets. Vegan is the new fad, animal fur is a fashion solecism, plastic is passé, walking is a style statement and Award events see last year's ensembles repeated. These are some ethical individualistic responses, what will have really made the Corona crisis bring some good is the ethical co-operation of big-money that runs governments (Minus, 2013; Faghih, 2019). Each and every person has the wherewithal to do her bit. Instead of voting for building and infrastructure, development and financial investments with rapacious governments, voting

against “them,” it is time to get back to a past when men in high places were judged for their ethics in private life and only then allowed to make political decisions that impact the individual as well as the world. According to Aristotle ethics were practical steps taken to ensure a better life which he calls success. And every state is a collection of citizens who have to develop their intellect and skill. The goal of the citizen is the “good life” of the state and that of the state is the “success” of the state (Barnes 123-128). Citizens should have liberty to own property: “Evidently it is better that property should be private—but men should make it common in use,” in other words, “sharing” (Barnes 129).

The individuals and groups who are taking practical steps to conserve energy, conserve water, go green, reduce waste or shift to nature cure are rendering the world a service that can shift the balance in favour of the planet. The age of man, the Anthropocene that has left human footprints on the suffering of the earth, may yet revive and get an ethical dimension to life.

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