History of ethical growth

1

We often live in a mental/emotional space which is narrowly centred on us; on me and the things that matter to me, including close relations. But we are also aware that we inhabit an ethical space, in which other people and higher goals also matter; in which we recognize claims on us by others, and modes of human fulfilment that are fuller, and more essential parts of our nature. These two spaces, the narrower and the wider are in tension, but we can occasionally reach/leap beyond this, and feel the full inspiration of and force of this wider call to live, really live in a much bigger space; that is feel this as our primary locus, of which the me-focus region is just a small province. While the dangers, concerns, worries which define this province are still there, they are no longer the main matters, no longer fill the whole horizon.

For me, as a Christian, I would call this wider, deeper zone a space of agape; but I recognize that for Buddhists it is that of karuna.

This bigger space places a demand on the dwellers in narrow centres, which we all are and remain: and that is, to make peace and concord with all the others who also are denizens of this space. And this is the tough demand, which we have never succeeded in living up to. We have disagreements, mutual critiques and condemnations; which we have to work through, find resolutions for.

This is where the insight that human history is the site of a slow growth in ethical vision becomes relevant. The omega point of this growth is this universal living up to the demands of this space.

This is the truth implicit in Teilhard's vision, though in reality the move to Omega is far from the assured and smoothly inevitable process which he seems to assert.

2

In fact there is always a lot of failure, even in relation to the early stages where the demands are not that severe. And these demands increase with time; and then (a) the new growths often have costs, entailing loss of earlier features which were in conformity with the telos: a good example of this is the growth of larger societies, incorporating and dwarfing early tribal societies, and their religions. These smaller societies had a degree of equality and solidarity which the big civilizations lose and leave behind them, developing as they do relations of exploitation, and breeding harshness and a shocking lack of concern. And yet the larger societies make possible facets of human culture, of art, of writing and thought, of higher visions of the human condition; and these are plainly in the line of development towards what I described as the human telos.

For plainly to understand this ethical growth we have to suppose an Aristotle-type theory of the human Form, a set of innate goals which demand fulfilment.

And, if we follow Teilhard, we can posit the telos as more than the human goal; the notion of Form has to be seen as of wider application than merely to humans. And we could say that the whole planet, the entire ecosystem is striving, is groaning and travailing to some end: to live up to the demands of the space of agape (or of karuna, or salaam, or …).

But the process of realizing this goal is not smooth and continuous. It has father a dialectical form; but not in the Hegelian sense where each move resolves a tension and thereby creates a new one; but at a higher level, so that the whole process can be understood retrospectively as a progress of Reason. In fact things are more messy and chaotic than this.

So the first big step forward, the creation of higher civilizations, brings inevitably a terrible loss, inequality, what we now recognize as a huge departure from the goal. This calls for an answer. Perhaps we can see the changes of the Axial period as the beginnings of such an answer. Not that they recovered equality, but they offered new ideals of the human which were genuinely universal, no longer simply dictated by the civilizational or social ethos.

Taking the innovations of the Axial period as an important step in mankind's ethical growth, we should note the feature that struck Jaspers: for all their differences, there is a strong analogy between the new doctrines which arose at close to the same time in very different civilizations, between which there was little or no contact. We can see here the germ of what we now recognize as the ecumenical sources of ethical growth: this is not sustained and furthered alone by any one spiritual source.

But given the massive inequalities arising in these civilizations, this reach for the universal could only be fully lived by marginal (or marginalized) individuals, Louis Dumont's "individus hors du monde": Greek philosophers, Hebrew prophets, Bhikhus, Confucian sages: people living on the margins of, if not in clear conflict with their societies.

For the majorities in these civilizations, these high demands were seen as binding on the marginal-critical individuals, but impractical for whole societies. Such institutions and practices as slavery, law enforcement through violence, war; these were understood as regrettable necessities. They perhaps should not exist in an ideal world, but in the really existent one, they are unavoidable; we can't do without them.

David Martin has introduced a useful term to speak of the relation between these ideal forms of life and the effective ethos of the societies that really exist. The ideal forms "transcend" the regnant ethos, but some exist at a more "acute angle of transcendence" than others. For instance, Buddhism and Christianity stand at a more acute angle to the societies which nominally embrace these faiths than Confucianism does.[1]

3

Over the next centuries, we can discern two lines of development: (1) new demands are seen as implicit in, or emerging from the faiths or philosophies which descend from the Axial period.

These by themselves increase the angle of transcendence with the existing social world. An area in which these have emerged in recent centuries concern the needs and rights of individuals. Individual human beings come to be endowed in the regnant ethic with rights: to freedom, to recognition of and respect for their "identity", to new levels of help and concern on the part of society and government. And along with these grows the demand for equality, and non-discrimination **between** individuals. These generate the French Revolutionary trilogy of liberté, égalité, fraternité. All of these reach one important culminating formulation in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights voted by the United Nations in 1948.

These demands of themselves increase the angle of transcendence of the reigning moral-political outlook to really existing societies; even though they are far from reflecting the full range of human aspiration, as we see them reflected in the religions and spiritualities.

(2) At the same time, moves have been made to realize effectively in societies standards which have long been considered just impractical ideals. Examples are: (i) the imperative demand growing in the late 18ᵗʰ Century effectively to abolish slavery: something which, at least as a legal façade, has been realized planet-wide; (ii) the practice of non-violent rebellion, started by Gandhi in the early 20 Century, and then followed by the Civil Rights movement in the US, then practised in the Philippine insurgency against Marcos, and then in the uprisings which ousted Communist governments at the end of the Century, and attempted in the "colour" revolutions since, most recently and not yet successfully in BieloRus.

These in some ways startling and unpredictable developments have the opposite effect from those under (1): they decrease the angle of transcendence, not by lowering expectations, but by raising the repertory of effective historical action to new ethical heights. Violence tends to breed violence, and the immense ethical advantage of such movements, as well as institutions such as Truth and Reconciliation Commissions after the hand-over of power (e.g., in South Africa), is that they offer a hope of reducing the legitimacy, and also the frequency of acts of violence (in strong contrast to the pioneering Revolutions of modern democracy, the French and the Russian, which unleashed paroxysms of "Terror").

4

We can see something of the shape of what I have been supposing is a drive to ethical ascent in human history. It has a dialectical form, messy and thus non-Hegelian, in which attempted steps forward can generate other evils – as the founding revolutions against French and Russian autocracies bred spectacular violence; and these evils can in turn call forth remedies: in this case practices of non-violent disobedience or protest. But there are other ways in which steps forward, as measured by the demands of the Universal Declaration, can generate very bad consequences which worsen or degrade the lives of the many while improving the lot of élites. The industrial revolution as enabler of the rapid development of capitalism certainly increased the well-being of capitalists as well as many land-holders, but at the cost of impoverishment of the many, both in terms of living standards, and in those of living conditions: ugly, over-

crowded, polluted surroundings in the new cities: until democratic action by non-élites succeeded in winning some of the economic gains for workers.

Until the social-democratic institutions and policies which tamed early capitalism were undermined by globalization and neo-liberalism in the late 20th Century, which laid the conditions in which the present wave of xenophobic populism is now sweeping the democratic world.

And another condition of this wave is also the perverse consequence of another valuable development, that of the creation of democratic political identities.

Democratic republics require a very definite sense of common identity: Americans, Canadians, Québécois, German, French, and so on. Why? Well, because the very nature of democracy, for several reasons, requires this strong commitment: it requires participation in voting, participation in paying taxes, participation in going to war, if there is conscription. If there is to be redistribution, there has to be a very profound solidarity to motivate these transfers from more to less fortunate. Democracy therefore requires a strong common identity.

Finally, and very importantly, if we are in a deliberative community—we are talking together, deciding among ourselves, voting, and making decisions—we have to trust that the other members of the group are really concerned with our common good.

You see a situation arising where independentist movements start very easily—and I happen to know a case like that, coming from Quebec—in which the minority says, "Well when they're talking about the good of our society, they're not talking about us; they're talking just about them. We're not part of their horizon." When that kind of trust breaks down, democracy is in very big trouble. It can even end up splitting into two. So we need a powerful common identity.[2]

But these powerful identities can slip very easily in a negative and exclusionary direction. A very good book by the Yale sociologist Jeff Alexander, *The Civic Sphere*,[3] makes this point: the common properties that make up this identity are very strongly morally charged; they're good. As a matter of fact, in most contemporary democratic societies, there are two sides to this identity: one facet defines certain principles:—that we believe in representative democracy, human rights, equality—but they also have a particular side: as a citizen, I am engaged in a particular historical project aimed at realizing these principles. Canadians, Americans, French, Germans, we each believe in our national project which is meant to embody these values. This is what Habermas is referring to with the term "constitutional patriotism."

It's easy to see how the principles side can generate exclusion. Take the infamous speech by Romney in the 2012 US Presidential election —and which cost him defeat at the hands of Obama: this contained the "47 percent" remark: 47 percent of the people are just passengers, they are being given what they need, they are not really producing. They are taking from the common stock, without adding to it. The underlying moral idea that the real American is productive, enterprising, self-reliant. The allegation is that 47% of the people are not living up to the stringent requirement of this idea. So, these people are not behaving like real Americans.

A little reflection would show how false this particular moralization is: many of the people who receive state aid, welfare, say, or food stamps, are clearly doing their best to take care of themselves and their families; while many of those which this calculation includes in the other 53% owe their prosperity to luck or their parents or some form of inherited wealth.

But this false moralization is not innocent. It provides the justification for a lot of measures adopted by the American Right—things like vote-suppressing legislation; which many American states are making even tighter in the wake of Trump's defeat. This could be a totally cynical move, but it is one that is probably justified in the perpetrators' minds by the sense that the people excluded fail to live up to the moral requirements of citizenship as we (good, upstanding, self-reliant citizens) define them.

Or, you can get another kind of exclusion: basically ethnic or historic, which provide the criteria. There are the people that really belong to the ethnicity which defines "our" identity, and then there are the people that came along later. There are the people that have always been here, in contrast to the immigrants who came later. What is operative here is basically an ethnic coding. And here, this slide to exclusion can occur.

Take Quebec: What's behind the identity expressed in "*Je suis Québécois*"? In one sense, there is a very powerful ethnic story behind that: seventy thousand French-speakers were left on the banks of the St. Lawrence when the British conquest occurred, ratified by the Treaty of Paris in 1763. And they've now built this vibrant French-speaking society of eight million. This is the result of a highly successful fight for survival. It's a very easy slide from a definition of "Québécois" as a citizen of Quebec citizen today, to a narrower concept, including only what we call *Quebecois de souche*—old stock Quebecois. The memory of the struggle to survive, and the fears surrounding this, can encourage that narrowing.

In the United States, there are more, stranger, sometimes horrifying notions of precedence. In a very interesting book by Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land,* the author describes the mentality. In the imaginary of certain "old stock" populations, there is a kind of order of precedence: the natives (but, of course, these don't include the indigenous populations, who are conveniently forgotten) come first, the people who arrived later come second; or, in an even more damaging version: whites come first, and blacks, Hispanics, etc. come after. Or: men are the "normal" candidates for certain positions or careers, and women only qualify in special circumstances.

These, rarely explicitly avowed, assumptions of precedence provide the basis for campaigns against "liberal" governments who are allegedly helping all these people with second priority and at the expense of those with first priority. That was a very powerful part of the Trump campaign. You get this slide, from all Americans are equal, to: some are more fully, really core Americans, and we shouldn't lose sight of this.

And in all "settler" societies, including my own, there is a widespread sense that indigenous people are backward and need to be brought under tutelage, which legitimates grievous forms of exploitation.

This slide is a catastrophe for various reasons. It's a catastrophe because it deeply divides, hampers, and paralyzes the democratic society, dividing us into first- and second-class

citizens. But it is also a catastrophe in another way, because it builds on the deprivations imposed on non-élites by the spread of Romney-type moralistic outlook among the rich and powerful. In many Western democracies, this has brought about a frustration caused by a Great Downgrade in the living standards of workers; who, as a result, feel that the system is stacked against them, that they can't affect it, and that their citizen efficacy is virtually non-existent. They are ready for a programme which would liberate the demos or give the demos power again, against the elites.

Only the demos has now been redescribed—either in a moralist, or ethnic, or historical-precedence way that excludes many people—which has the double disadvantage that it deeply divides the society, and this second disadvantage, that it does not at all meet the actual problems and challenges of the Downgrade.

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Apart from these side effects of what at least appear to be ethical steps forward, we have to reckon with the fascination with evil which humans can easily fall into: the kind of thing we see breaking out in situations of conflict, when people – and especially men - can launch into orgies of destruction: killing, rape, laying waste the land. The very horror of this, its utterly forbidden nature, is what renders it exciting, lived as liberation, the headiest wine of all.

There is a joy at breaking the rules which we can all experience, the adolescent moment when we escape the supervision of tutors and guardians, but this usually remains safely within bounds. It takes a giant step from there to the massacres of Da'esh, and we can only dimly sense the deprivation of meaning which these are meant to assuage, or the relief offered by the utter self-forgetfulness in the group which opens the path to mindless violence.

Orgiastic violence often finds a spring board in calculated strategic killing, undertaken in cold blood; as we can see with the case of Naziism, and Bolshevism.

Reforming minorities can revel in their own power, often serving a good end (e.g., the Chinese Communist party "lifting" many millions out of abject poverty), but crushing many human beings in the process, in total disrespect of their freedom, integrity, culture, religion.
Then their righteous sense of their power and efficacy can come to be enjoyed for its own sake. There is a kind of excitement which comes from herding people, which can slide into a perverse enjoyment of domination and destruction for its own sake. The self-satisfaction of a Xi Jin-Ping can call forth, or become, the revelling in destruction of a Pol Pot, or in rape of a Beria. Or the justified self-defense of the Red Army against Nazi invasion can generate the orgy of rape after the victory over conquered Germany.
These excesses are often intensified by the excitement that humans can feel at transgression.
As Simone Weil puts it: "licence has always entranced men, and that is why, throughout history, cities have been sacked" 55.

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From all this, it should be clear that human ethical growth is not simply linear, or additive, with high stages building on earlier, lower ones. Advances in one respect trigger (often unsuspected) evils: civilization engenders hierarchy and exploitation; economic growth can do something similar, besides devastating the environment. Violence in defence of the good against evil can generate orgiastic destruction. So we witness a dialectical process in which new forces have to arise to deal with the evils generated by past efforts at improvement, even where these were well-intentioned and benignly motivated. And this process is chaotic, it is not teleologically-directed upward à la Hegel, so that each successful outcome of struggle is guaranteed to take us higher than the previous ones. History seems to offer no guarantee that the forces of light will always prevail.

The result can be evil on an unprecedented scale. The violence of the 20th Century: the Holocaust, Gulag, Killing Fields puts the massacres of previous centuries in the shade. In face of this, we could easily be tempted to speak of history as the site of a monstrous growth of evil.

Another reason to abandon the model of history as steady growth of ethical performance towards a model like the Universal Declaration is that this entirely ignores the range of human aspirations which go beyond the widely accepted conceptions of human flourishing in our contemporary civilization (Or indeed, in any previous civilization).

These include religious aspirations, but they are also given expression in literature, art, music.

(In the latter category, we could cite Beethoven's late quartets, Bach's B Minor Mass, and a host of other works).

These aspirations stand outside widely agreed formulae of the good life because they call for much more far-reaching transformations of human life; for example, towards self-emptying agape, or Buddhist karuna; or they call for a perception of the particular potentiality of each human being, which can easily be lost to view in some generalized conception of well-being supposedly applicable to everyone.

The failure to appreciate, even to perceive the person in the Citizen or Worker, with his or her depth aspirations, has been one reason why revolutionary attempts to realize the (highly valid) triple democratic norms of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity has often gone so terribly awry in modern history. One of the most horrifying contemporary example is Xi Jin-Ping's attempt to submit Muslim Ouigirs to cultural genocide in order to make them happy, lobotomized members of a socialist society "with Chinese characteristics".

The same screening out of our depth aspirations underlies the "trans-humanist" dream of Yuval Harari, dubbed "Homo Deus". This foresees a world in which humans remake themselves through their control of the human genome, by means of a non-biological intelligence which the advances of AI will provide us with.

It should be obvious that that this path, if it can be followed at all, is a road to horror rather than divinity. You don't have to be a person of faith to appreciate this, as Jürgen Habermas has shown. Or as Leszek Kolakowski put it : « Culture, when it loses its sacred sense, loses all sense. » (Gardels 174-5, 178)

But then why talk of ethical "growth"? Because in fact, along two axes there does seem to be movement forward. One is the raising of ethical standards, through steps like the adoption of the Universal Declaration of 1948; or the growing demand since the 18th Century to abolish slavery altogether. Why cite this, when these standards are so widely and flagrantly violated in practice? The striking fact here is that those who violate them so often feel called upon to pretend that they are observing them. The present Chinese government feels it has to say that reports of its cultural genocide in Xinzhiang are malicious lies originating in the US. Continued bad practice has to be accompanied by ever greater waves of hypocrisy. One might ask: is this progress?

Maybe not. But there is another axis where advances are being made and this involves what I called above raising the repertory of effective historical action to new ethical heights. This occurs when a Gandhi succeeds in transposing the fight against foreign rule in India into non-violent form; and when King and the civil rights movement do something analogous in their battle against racism and for equality. The genuine ethical growth involved can be seen if we examine more closely what is involved in these changes.

Normally these battles are seen by those engaged in them as fights over privileges enjoyed, for example, by whites, deservedly in the eyes of many whites, but clearly undeservedly by blacks and most uninvolved by-standers. To resolve these disputes in a satisfactory way whites would have to lose something. But the discourse of civil rights has another take on the situation.

The defence of privilege here exacts huge costs. It involves inhabiting a cage which inhibits, even crushes ethical growth. (1) Whites have to cling to a deep untruth, that of their superiority over blacks; (2) At some deep level, whites are aware of what they have inflicted on blacks, and they fear retaliation; and this even when they refuse conscious acknowledgement of this. A factor in many cases of white policemen shooting black men is that fear, which pushes them to shoot first and ask questions afterward. So racist whites have to live with an untruth (1), and a fear (2). But there is a third deprivation: (3) this privilege is an obstacle to the kinds of collective achievements that a more equal society could enable whites and blacks to realize together.

The first (1) goes against the human telos to live in the truth; (2) subjects racists to live in fear, and (3) deprives them of the positive achievements of democratic self-rule, provided they could come to see the person in each other. And perhaps most important of all, (4) the continued division deprives them of the mutual enrichment, the enlarging and deepening of their humanity which comes from open exchange between people of widely different backgrounds and cultures.

This is what John Lewis was talking about when he called on his fellow-citizens to "lay down the burden of hatred". To identify this as a burden requires ethical discernment. To build this insight into a democratic society's self-understanding takes this insight further, beyond the enlightened views of some individuals, into the collective awareness of the community. This would be something new in human history.

Of course, for believers in white superiority, whether self-admitted or denied, this message of liberation is seen as another gratuitous insult heaped on them by "liberal élites": are you saying we live in untruth and fear? How dare you? It can only be delivered by people who understand their sense of identity and the many admirable features it contains. Ideally, it should come from insiders who have come to see the limitations of the traditional self-understanding.

Will this deeper insight win through in the polarized exchange of insult and accusation which politics has become in many Western democracies? There is certainly no guarantee. But the very fact that such spaces of reconciliation can be conceived, and the possible repertory of creative and humane social life enlarged, needs to be taken into account. There is a more humane space beyond and above our present bitter divisions.

We should also note that those who are most effective in communicating these new insights are people in whom the satisfactions of winning the contest, and/or of venting their anger on agents of destruction, are overcome by a recognition of the human potential of their adversaries and the desire to establish a new relation of mutual recognition and collaboration with them. In fact, those who are capable of this are people who are deeply rooted in their spiritual sources, often religious.

And indeed, the gains (1)-(4) above only become stable and secure where this new understanding of them becomes widespread, and the sense that we are fighting a zero-sum game, where the gains of the former under-privileged entail a corresponding loss by those who used to be on top. The actual **experience** of mutual enrichment is what enables us to go beyond the crippling inequalities of history.

I think that this is proof of our capacity for ethical growth. Am I right?

An ecumenical sense is growing over the last decades which inspires attempts to elaborate this common human ethic, and to take inter-faith action to promote it. Some recent encyclicals of Pope Francis – I am thinking of *Laudato si*, and *Fratelli Tutti* – are obviously not addressed only to the faithful, but amount to a contribution to this world exchange aimed at elaborating a common ethic.

Take for instance, this remarkable passage from *Fratelli Tutti*:

"Our relationships, if healthy and authentic, open us to others who expand and enrich us. Nowadays, our noblest social instincts can easily be thwarted by self-centred chats that give the impression of being deep relationships. On the contrary, authentic and mature love and true friendship can only take root in hearts open to growth through relationships with others. As couples or friends, we find that our hearts expand as we step out of ourselves and embrace others. Closed groups and self-absorbed couples that define themselves in opposition to others tend to be expressions of selfishness and mere self-preservation." (para 89)

There is a lot of (good) moral advice in Francis' Encyclical, but there is also another (ethical) dimension: a philosophical anthropology which sees us as realizing more fully our humanity through contact and exchange with people and cultures beyond our original comfort zone. Through these exchanges new creative human possibilities are disclosed, and human life is enriched. This is how I understand what Francis calls in this encyclical the "law of exstasis" operative in human life.

Our common ethic is being enriched in the exchanges which are happening today.

10

But if we are converging on a common ethic, must it follow that we are heading for a single universal spirituality/religion? Obviously not. Think of how different, e.g., Christian faith and Buddhist spirituality are. (As the Dali Lama once put it, "you can't put a sheep's head on a yak's body".)

Will they then fall away as irrelevant? Even more obviously not. They each offer paths of transformation – through liturgy, prayer, meditation, disciplines – without which our ethic will be forever a dead letter.

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[1] David Martin, *Ruin and Restoration*

[2] See Craig Calhoun, *Why Nations Matter*

[3] Jeff Alexander, *The Civic Sphere*: see also Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy*, CUP 2005.