

{ the university and the construction of a new ethics

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¹ I am thinking of the warnings
issued by prominent scientists
since the splitting of the atom
and the construction of the
first nuclear bomb. Alfred
Einstein is, of course, the most
prominent among them. But
there have been many others.

² There have, of course, been
many warnings. European
Socialist writers, from Karl
Marx to Rosa Luxemburg in
the 20th Century have raised
the issue of a possible collapse
of advanced capitalism, into
barbarism. Sigmund Freud
was skeptical, regarding the
capacity of human beings, to
control their destructive urges.
And the philosophers Martin

Is it right; is it acceptable that in the contemporary world differences between the wealthy and the poor become larger every year? That very few individuals and families may have financial control over fortunes which are larger than the annual budgets of several poor countries, while millions and billions of people survive at starvation level, if they survive at all?

Is it right, is it justifiable that military budgets constantly increase in several countries, while the funds spent on the prevention of the spread of contagious diseases, on food-support for the poor, and on the prevention of the malnutrition of children constantly decrease? Is it right, is it justifiable that in our times dangers to the maintenance of a liveable natural environment, access to clean air, clean water, the prevention of further soil-erosion, are treated as if these dangers were still far away, as if they did not already damage the lives of vast numbers of people?

Is it right; is it justifiable, that millions of people are forced into migration, leaving their home areas or their home countries, having to accept exploitative, often life-threatening conditions of work, in order to support their families?

This is just the beginning of a list, an inventory of social ills, which are widely known, sometimes well identified, even discussed in the daily press and the mass media, but which are continuing to fester; to enter into the body politic, almost without encountering resistance, without the application of coordinated measures in order to reverse these trends.

My list of social ills is meant to suggest that we do need a new ethics, or rather, a new will and determination to establish the force of a new ethics, an ethics which can lead to a reversal of a way of life which now endangers the survival of the planet and the human species itself.

And it is in the universities that the first warnings were issued, the first startling analyses prepared.¹ Is it still important, that the universities or rather, that individuals and groups primarily located in institutions of higher learning, continue to warn the public, civil society, and governments, that contemporary human societies are following a dangerous and thoughtless course, that some kind of reversal, a significant reversal in our way of life is needed.

It begins to look as if the construction of just, decent and caring societies becomes a necessity, a necessity of human survival even; the alternative are barbarism and decline, the sinking into violent confusion on a scale beyond comparison in the history of humanity.²

If some research centres and some academics and intellectuals³ have had a major role, in the recent past, in pointing out and describing the dangers mentioned, can the universities today, and in the near future, also play a role in the construction of an ethic, i.e. of attitudes of care, responsibility and foresight, which can contribute to the changes needed?

Which would be these universities and how might they contribute?

We need to take a closer look at universities today, what they are and do, in order to address these questions.

The university in which I have worked for decades, the University of Toronto in Canada, is the country's largest. It has the largest graduate school, outstanding research centres, and several of its faculties have a world-wide reputation.⁴

Yet when I think of the social ills mentioned in the beginning and ask myself whether my university seriously contributes to alleviating them, or even overcoming them, I cannot point to clear commitments or priorities. It is impossible to identify something like a core-ethics, which would direct the collective attention of the university toward the greatest problems of survival and well-being facing humanity today.

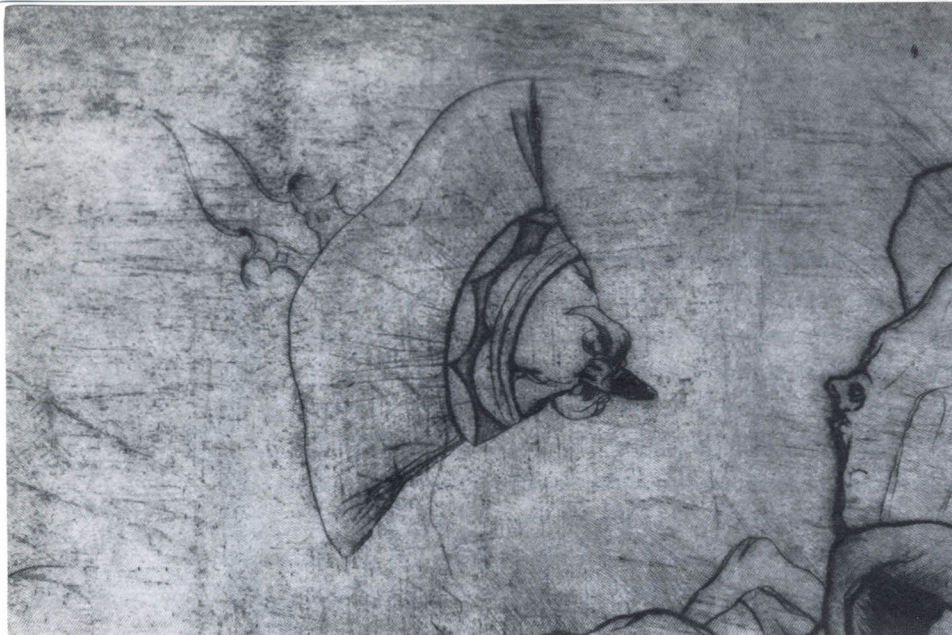
Large universities with large graduate schools, especially in North-America, are pushed and pulled in many directions. Very frequently the «left hand» does not know what the «right hand» is doing. The largest departments, research centres and graduate programs are to be found in faculties of medicine, engineering, law and business. The humanities and social studies («social sciences») often appear to have a marginal presence and voice. This also applies to education. So do humanitarian efforts based in the sciences, such as the organization Science for Peace (to which I belong).

Money is a huge factor in the orientation followed by many research and graduate programs. Very frequently funding comes from interested parties, such as the pharmaceutical industries which sponsor much research in medicine. Often conditions are attached to funding which have more to do with the securing of profits than with developing the best medicines possible. In engineering, especially in the United States, it is the military which funds the most expensive projects. These often include a civilian component. Indeed, it is at times almost impossible to separate the military and civilian functions. Thus the humanitarian purposes of engineering designs become distorted or even marginalized.

Heidegger and Theodor Adorno are famous for their disillusioned diagnoses of the capacity of post-World-War II European societies, to develop in a positive direction, and this despite the fact that their political perspectives were opposite to each other.

³ I am thinking of the studies on global warming and similar topics published in *NATURE* and in *SCIENCE*.

⁴ North-American universities with large graduate schools have at times been compared to the German universities based on the ideas of Wilhelm von Humboldt, who was minister of education in the government of Prussia after the end of the Napoleonic wars and a friend of Hegel's, the great philosopher teaching in Berlin, at a university still called «Humboldt University». But, in fact, the Humboldtian project had a much deeper ethical foundation than a North-American graduate school. All advanced studies were to be rooted in philosophy or linked with it and express a comprehensive vision of the human condition, then to be translated into practice. For a contemporary elaboration of this idea see (Jaspers, 1961) and Schelsky (1963). And for a critical, but also appreciative discussion Habermas (1989: 100-128).



Araña de Pílores (fragmento) / Irma Gutiérrez

I therefore believe that change in the form of the construction of a new ethic can best be brought about in small universities with relatively limited research budgets, not connected with large and impressive national or international priorities. A new ethic still has to be constructed. Yet for it to be constructed there has to be an ethos, a shared spirit of concern, and trust, and the will to change, animating a community of learning.

This spirit can only develop, in our times, as people respond strongly to the great social ills mentioned.

Political awareness is needed, as well as a practice of regular intervention alerting the population and the official structures of power to the absence of measures providing for the well-being of all of the population.

This requires courage, a practice of fearlessness, and the will and determination never to accept easy answers; for nothing is ever as good as it could be.

Historically, universities have had much in common with monasteries. Even in the modern age and up to today, they have kept themselves apart from much of social life and have received privileges

not available to the majority of people in modern societies. Social commitment (the commitment to social justice and the improvement of community life) has not always been valued in universities, less so than the «value-free» pursuit of discovery,⁵ of the accumulation of findings.

I believe universities, the small centres of learning which think of, have to go in the opposite direction. They have to enter into and become part of communities, accessible to the fears and uncertainties which most people in our societies experience. They have to place less emphasis on advanced degrees, less emphasis on formal degrees in general, and give more recognition to reflective attitudes and dispositions arising in and from practice.⁶

Often this may happen without formal degrees. For in our times, we have more people with formal degrees than ever before, in hundreds of fields and disciplines. But we do not have more understanding. Otherwise the massively destructive and morally offensive tendencies which I described in the beginning would not constantly outgrow the weak remedies applied to them.

Thus for me the issue is not only the construction of a new ethic. For this certainly is not just an intellectual task. The issue also is the building of new institutions, or the transformation of some which already exist.

I am thinking of centres of learning and social intervention.⁷ A new ethic could arise from the intellectual and affective monitoring of social interventions. It would arise from discussion circles and conversation groups, rather than formal academic seminars.

⁵ The term «value-free science» probably owes its existence to the German sociologist Max Weber, who was concerned to protect the beginning social sciences from being politicized, while also arguing for a hermeneutical approach in the study of social phenomena.

⁶ All of Paulo Freire's works are most instructive in this context.

⁷ I have been told that a centre of this nature once existed in Cuernavaca, when Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire cooperated there, for a little while.

It would require the willingness and institutional preparation for living with uncertainty, the uncertainty of not knowing whether something will work, before it has been tried.

Most of all, a new ethic would arise from a shared understanding of what the historical and recent past have been, especially in the continents of America:

Why do our societies place so much value on money and the accumulation of riches?

Why do they treat their environments as limitless resources to be exploited, mostly for financial profit? Why are they so heavily militarised and inclined to apply force, rather than engage in social reform?

And on the positive side: what can be done to acknowledge, develop and integrate the human richness of the continents of America? Their diversity, not only their ethnic, racial, religious, and political diversity, but also their practices of survival and their capacity to maintain and construct communities, even in the face of extreme adversity, as our indigenous communities have shown?⁸

What can be done to distance ourselves from the fascination with technologies so typical of the North in America and to learn to practice deep integration with others and the natural environment?

What can be done to slowly outgrow the industrial mode of production, systems of high-intensity consumption, exaggerated reliance on technologies and organisation and the never fulfilled promise of market-capitalism, that «in the end» everyone will be well off, better off than previous generations?

The new ethic I think of would have to be based on the acceptance of death and suffering, of imperfection, while also always using intellectual, affective and community resources in order to determine, when deaths, premature, early deaths, could have been avoided and suffering may not have been necessary.

But it will also regard the recognition of our «having to die» as a capacity, not a curse.

For this is how human beings integrate with all that is, as natural embodied beings.

And suffering, when willingly assumed, may also be a source of learning, a resource for the development of a more penetrating consciousness of life.

The new ethic I think of would be attentive to the wondrous, astonishing play of life as something which we are not in control of, but into which human beings can integrate.⁹

As one takes this step, control and mastery of the conditions of life which has been pursued with so much energy and through so many calamities (wars, genocides, etc.) in recent centuries, it will become a secondary task.

The primary task will be the building of a more contemplative culture which values life for what it is: both our own lives and what is around us.

At this juncture, one might say, ethics and aesthetics merge. As we discover the beauty of what is, of our own being alive as well as of the environments which still exist,

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⁸ In Canada and the United States the indigenous population is growing once again. And this after having undergone centuries of close to genocidal persecution and marginalisation.

⁹ I owe much to writings of Eckhart Tolle (2005) with respect to this new perspective.

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we will become determined to eliminate the ugliness which modern commercial civilization has produced.

I believe that this new ethic can arise in many places, and none is privileged, not even the university.

Universities can become «centres of communication and learning» meeting places for people to share experiences and interpretations, rather than institutions of formal learning. I do not think we need more «higher learning», more advanced knowledge.

We need to begin to feel at home in the «poverty of our own being», as a philosopher once said.

Thus we can become more open to what is, to others, things, all that life and the Earth can give.

Is it unfair to note that universities as we know them have not really embraced this task?

Could it be that it is too simple, too obvious, not necessarily inviting great intellectual effort or large-scale research programs for never ending discussion?

Can universities as we know them and as they are teach courage, the will to face reality as it is, as well as the will, not to let injustice and destructiveness proliferate? Or do they teach opportunism and accommodation?

Perhaps universities need to learn from less powerful and less recognized institutions: small community groups, and groups

of discussion and reflection in social movements, building structures of support under conditions of misery.

We may not separate the effort to understand from the «courage to be» and from living with courage, beyond the search for total security.

Such courage is mostly learned outside universities and in confrontation with difficult and directly experienced circumstances.

It is here where a new ethic can take root, by demanding that people be fully open to what is, allow themselves to be affected by distress, suffering and disorientation. This ethic would be focused on the reduction of suffering. It would be at the centre of a struggle to overcome cruelty; it would no longer give priority to overcoming ignorance.

If the Enlightenment thought, that to «dare to know»,¹⁰ the courage to want to know, would lead to eliminating suffering, by making new discoveries in defying dogma and traditional beliefs (for example in the sciences, as exemplified e.g. by Galileo), or by overcoming the fear of traditional aristocratic and ecclesiastic authorities, in our times we need to have the courage to face different powers, powers that undermine social solidarity and prevent people from understanding how damaging the modern machinery of commerce and industrial production has been and continues to be.

A new ethic will encourage us to identify with others, to learn solidarity and care, by way of upholding empathy and fellow-feeling, beyond all traditional boundaries, as the greatest goods. It will not tolerate the excuse that «we did not know how much misery exists» outside the secure walls of financial centres and corporate headquarters. It will demand

¹⁰ Dare to know, dare to use your own intelligence, was the slogan invented by the great critical philosopher Immanuel Kant, at the end of the 18th Century, in order to describe the central theme of the Enlightenment. For Kant, the Enlightenment stood for autonomy, both intellectual and moral, and the rejection of dogmatism and of the imposition of beliefs.

the development of centres of learning and communication which operate in clear contrast to many established universities which are integrated into the dominant commercial, industrial and security apparatus, often without the capacity to reflect on this situation and failing to look for ways to liberate themselves from this dependency.

In the early modern era, during the Renaissance and during the 17th and 18th Century enlightenment, many major intellectual innovations in the sciences and in philosophy were initiated outside the historical universities.

Perhaps this also is the task for our times, even if it is a process going in the reverse direction.

Members of the academic staff in the universities, especially in field in which issues of ethics and morality are directly addressed, need to look for those sites and those activities, in which people have developed a vision of society and the future focused on the real necessities of survival, cooperation and well-being, and where they have done so in unexpected, even surprising ways, or in the face of great adversity. These efforts may be

quite partial and appear to be limited and uncomfortable.

They may be poor peoples' solidarity organizations. Or they may be the small centres of a new spirituality, frequently building on practices from Asia. Or they may be the continuous study sessions initiated by progressive social movements willing to face the increasingly catastrophic conditions of life in our «walmartized» societies.

Often activities developing on the margins of large universities also matter, such as those which focus on international solidarity, migrant justice, and the plight of undocumented populations.

Again, the issue no longer is the advancement of knowledge as such, rather the issue is our capacity, as academics and intellectual workers, to assimilate and clarify the thinking that already happens in many situations, in which there is little «official» and no strong institutional support or recognition, other than the support and recognition which participants in these situations give to one another. It is in humble contexts like these that a new social ethics may arise, as well as new or reformed institution of learning. ■

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