

Bio-Ethics

Reviewing the ethical relations of humans towards animals and plants

By Fritz Jahr

The strict distinction between animal and human being [Mensch], dominant in our European culture up to the end of the 18th century, cannot be supported anymore. The heart of the European human being up to the French Revolution was fighting towards the unity of religious, philosophical, and scientific knowledge; but such a unity had to be abandoned under the pressure of more information.

It will always be the merit of modern natural sciences to finally have made possible an unbiased study of the world [Weltgeschehen]. We would not be truth-seekers today, if we would have given up the results of animal experimentation, blood research etc.. On the other hand, we cannot deny that precisely these scientific triumphs of the human spirit have taken away the dominant position of the human being in the world in general. Philosophy, formerly prescribing leading ideals for the natural sciences, now has to build her systems on the basis of specific knowledge from the natural sciences,—and it was only a poetic-philosophical [dichterphilosophische] interpretation of Darwin's insight, when Nietzsche considered humans to be a somewhat inferior stage towards a higher sage in evolution, as a 'rope extended between animal and superman [Uebersmensch].

What results from this revolution? First, the fundamental equivalence of human being and animal as an object in psychology. Today, it [psychology] does not limit itself to human beings, but applies the same methods as well in regard to animals, and, as documented by comparative anatomical-zoological research, quite instructive comparisons between human soul and animal soul have been done. Yes, even beginnings of plant psychology are visible,—the most prominent representatives are G. Th. Fechner in the past, R. H. France, Ad. Wagner and the Indian Bose at present, so that modern psychology covers all living beings in research. Given these circumstances, it is only logical when R. Eisler speaks of Bio-Psychik (science of the soul of all, what lives).

From Bio-Psychik it is only a step towards Bio-ethics, i.e. the assumption of moral obligations not only towards humans, but towards all forms of life. In reality, bio-ethics is not just a discovery of modern times. An especially attractive example from

the past is the figure of St. Francis of Assisi (1182 – 1226) with his great love towards animals, his warm sympathy for all forms of life, centuries before the Rousseau's romanticism for the entire nature.

When the unity of the European weltanschauung broke down at the end of the Baroque period, European intellectual life for the first time was ready for the influence of foreign weltanschauungs [Gedankenwelten] without prejudice. Already Herder's comprehensive spirit, probably the most sensitive in those days for things to come, expected of humans, that, based on the image of the all encompassing deity, they project themselves into each and every creature and sense with it the way it needs. Such a reasoning already reminds of the Indian philosophy, which by the way of England just had been discovered. But only during the time of Romanticism has India really influenced European intellectual life, including its then most important province Germany. The teaching of reincarnation, as developed in India, has influenced the reasoning of Indian schools of philosophy, especially the school of Sankya. An offspring of this school is the yoga teaching, drawing the most rigorous consequences from these reasonings. The yoga repentant [Jogabüßer] under no circumstances is allowed to live at the cost of co-creatures; above all, he shall under no circumstances kill any animal, but only under certain conditions enjoy vegetable foods. He has to wear a veil over his mouth in order not to inhale even a small living being; for the same reason he has to filter drinking water and shall not take a bath. The addiction to not harm a living being in the process of self-preservation even leads some Indian repentants to eat horse manure. If in this content Buddha is mentioned, one has to stress that especially this religious leader refused such fanatic self-harm of the school of yoga. Buddha forbade the food based on animal products, but allows vegetable based foods totally. How much Buddha himself and his teachings totally believed in re-incarnation of the soul, for us Europeans is very well demonstrated by the collection of Buddhist stories collected by Jatakas, stories ascribed to Buddha and narrating about his early life. He claims that he has lived as a human being before, but also remembers his former lives as an elephant, a gazelle, a crab etc. . Even more beautiful than in Francis of Assisi, these narratives express the thought, that a human being is related to all creatures in essence.

Such a sequence of reasoning caused similar thoughts in European intellectual life, even if not in such a strict version. Theologian Schleiermacher (1768 – 1834) declared it to be immoral to destroy life and formation [Leben und Gestaltung], as they are, if there is no reasonable cause to do so. Similarly, the philosopher Krause, a con-

temporary of Schleiermacher, requests to respect each and every living being and not to destroy it without reason. Because, they all, plants and animals, also humans, have similar rights, but not equal right depending on the requirements for reaching their specific destiny. The philosopher Schopenhauer, who claimed as special importance of his ethics as based primarily on the sentiment of compassion and required as well towards animals, openly referred to the Indian intellectual world [Gedankenwelt]. Via Richard Wagner, who was strongly influenced by Schopenhauer and a compassionate animal lover and friend of animal protection, those thoughts have become a common value for a broadest group of people.

Thus, in regard to animals such a rule has become self-understanding, at least as far as unnecessary torture is concerned. With plants it is different, so. For some, at the first moment it might sound unreasonable to have certain ethical obligations towards plants. But already [apostle] Paul directed our compassion towards animals and plants. Comparable are the illuminated sentimental [verklaert stimmungsvollen] interpretations in Richard Wagner's 3rd act of 'Parsifal'. In pious devotion, humans prevent, at least on Good Friday, that stalks and flowers in the fields are being hurt by walking carefully. But also in reasonings on plant ethics by a sober philosopher such as Eduard von Hartmann, who passed away 20 years ago, we find similar thoughts. In an article on flower-luxury he describes a cut flower: 'She is an organism deadly hurt, but only her colors not yet destroyed, a head still, but separated from the torso. – Whenever I see a rose in a glass of water or tied into a bouquet, I cannot fight the unpleasant thought that a human being has murdered a flower life for the purpose to enjoy his/her eyes while dying, an eye which is heartless enough, not to sense an unnatural death under the veil of life.'

A majority of people naturally is not as sensitive as Ed. von Hartmann. However, everyone knows quite well, that plants are living beings, that cutting flowers hurts them; but the thought that the flower might sense it, is far away. The concept of plant-soul so far has not taken hold in us. Additional, we know that flowers also die and dry out, while they are on the plant, and therefore one does not take issue with cutting flowers, in particular when they were cultivated for that specific purpose.

Thus, we start from a totally different point of view than the Indian fanatics, who do not want to hurt any living entity. Also, our regulations by law and police protecting certain plants and flowers in specific areas (such as plants in the Alps) are based on totally different assumptions. The police state [Polizeistaat] intends to protect those plants from being extinct in those areas, also for people to enjoy them in

later times. Whenever there are plants abundant, the state does not intend to protect them as an end in themselves.

Also, our concept of animal protection rests on an essentially different foundation than the attitude of the Indians. When we read in the novel 'Holy Hate' [Der heilige Hass] by Richard Voss, that a Rodyia-boy, i.e. a member of a depicted caste, does even not want to kill a snake, because 'also the snakes are our brothers and sisters', we do not accept such a reasoning; we actually hold it to be our duty to kill harmful animals, if we can. We have our farm animals been killed by the butcher and the harmless prey by the hunter, because we want to eat meat, which some in our areas feel they cannot miss, while in tropical countries vegetarian food is abundantly available. Our animal protection, thus, has a utilitarian aspect, which is bravely overlooked by the Indians, while we are content with at least avoiding unnecessary suffering. Unfortunately, legal regulations against prevention or punishment of those tortures are not strongly enough introduced in all civilized countries [Kulturländern]. But, we are on the road of progress and animal protection get more and more support in wider circles, such as no cultivated human being will [anständiger Mensch] without criticism accepts, that a thug [Flegel] without any afterthought beholds flowers with a stick while on the walk or that children break flowers only to through them away after a few steps. Our self-education, in this regard, already has made essential progress, but we have to go further, so that the guiding rule for our actions may be the bio-ethical demand: *'Respect every living being on principle as an end in itself and treat it, if possible, as such!'*

Postscript: Jahr's article 'Bio+Ethik. Eine Umschau über die ethischen Beziehungen des Menschen zu Tier und Pflanze' was the Editorial in the leading German-language science journal 'Kosmos. Handweise für Naturfreunde und Zentralblatt für das naturwissenschaftliche Bildungs- und Sammelwesen', published by 'Kosmos. Gesellschaft der Naturfreunde' [Society of Friends of Nature], Stuttgart 1927, volume 24, pages 2-4. When I first discovered and read the article close to a decade ago, it took a long time to find out more about the author, his other writings and his personal file in the archives of the Prussian United Church in Magdeburg. It is remarkable that a prestigious and well established science journal, comparable to the reputation of 'Nature' and 'Science' today, accepted a paper by an unknown Protestant pastor, who never had published before,—just on the merits of his forward looking innovative concept of a new academic discipline and a content-rich Bioethical Imperative replacing Kant's Categorical Imperative, understood as having become defi-

cient for future ethics. Jahr was in bad health for most of his life and therefore his oeuvre contains only a dozen small articles. His writings had no immediate influence during his lifetime. This article 'Bio+Ethik' and 'Drei Studien zum 5. Gebot' [Three Studies concerning the 5th Commandment] in: 'Ethik. Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik' 1934, 11:183-187 are in reprint in H. M. Sass 'Fritz Jahr's Bioethischer Imperativ. 80 Jahre Bioethik in Deutschland 1927 – 2007', Bochum: Zentrum für Medizinische Ethik 2007, 34- 41 [also online in www.practical-ethics.org/bioethik]; see also my article, 'Fritz Jahr's Early 1927 Concept of Bio-Ethics', in: Kennedy Inst Ethics J, 2007, 17(4):279-295. My translation keeps close to the old style and wording of German academic writing of the early 20th century, hopefully without hurting the content. Jahr, of course, had only limited and secondary information on Indian schools of weltanschauung and yoga at his time.

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