1. Introduction

1.1. A matter of terminology

In moral doctrine, we use two terms that are virtually interchangeable, ethics and morality. Generally speaking, the term ethics is considered to be more modern than morality, which, depending on the person, refers rather to individual conduct or social rules. Ethics comes from the Greek "ethos" meaning custom, and morality comes from the Latin "mores", also meaning custom.

An important distinction must be made between science and ethics, and this could be extended to the difference between learning and wisdom.

1.2. Science and ethics

Science is aimed at expanding knowledge and gaining certainty whereas philosophy is a quest for wisdom. Wisdom is the result of a personal and subjective journey, whereas, when considered as a whole, scientific learning is defined as the corpus of knowledge accepted to be true. Ideally, scientists seek the truth and greater knowledge. Philosophers, on the other hand, strive for self discovery and human truth. Two different objects therefore emerge: reality for science and humanity (as a whole and within each human being) for philosophy. Philosophy is often referred to as a human science, i.e., a form of learning that cannot meet the criteria of truth and verifiability of hard sciences, such as chemistry or physics. Like sociology, anthropology, psychology and economics, the truth of discoveries in philosophy does not carry the same weight as hard sciences because they cannot be verified by any clearly defined, precise and rigorous methodological process as is the case with hard sciences. Herein lies the essential difference between philosophy, and therefore one of its elements — ethics — and science. Where in science there are unquestionable truths, resulting from a set methodological process, in philosophy all truths can be challenged or queried. Similarly, ethics rejects final certainty. It aims to define the criteria for a good life but the principles or maxims governing action can never be imposed in any objectively indisputable
way. Indeed, the reality referred to in ethics is humankind in all its complexity, unpredictability, uncertainty and changeability.

No individual is ever exactly the same: time brings about change, as do events, personal history and the influence of experiences and memories. Individuals also change according to the way in which they continuously rethink themselves as both the same and different people.

So there is no such thing as ethical science. This term is nothing but a barbarism to any philosopher. Some have attempted to establish philosophical science and objective learning, as Hegel did, but this has always confined humans to a system, and disregarded their unpredictability, elusive subjective nature and, above all, freedom. In sum, everything that makes them different from machines and computers.

In ethics, it is therefore impossible to lay down rules of conduct once and for all. There are no totally reliable rules of conduct. It is important to understand this before approaching the thoughts of the various philosophers in ethics. No one philosopher is capable of providing a ready-made solution, as each one puts forward their interpretation of reality and the principles and particular rules governing action. As they are not gods, nobody has got it completely right in philosophy, but in the same way, so Aristotle tells us, nobody has got it completely wrong either. Each of the theories considered below therefore contains an element of truth.

In philosophy, and therefore also in ethics, the key word is questioning, and the question mark is the symbol of philosophical behaviour. It can be used to reveal the flaws in ideas that are plainly incoherent or unacceptable. It sweeps away prejudices and preconceived ideas, and, through reflection, enables individuals to develop a sharp and clear-sighted view of things. The strength of questioning reveals the importance of doubt and the absence of final certainties in philosophy, despite the constant desire for the truth. It is also this paradox that gives philosophical thought its edge.

So if ethics is not a science because we will never be able to discover rules of conduct that are certain and eternally true, each individual must then reflect on their own personal ideal, their vision for a fair world and their conception of what is good. Nobody holds the truth in ethics, and the only requirement for individuals, whose actions may raise ethical questions, is to be able to justify their choices, have good reasons for acting the way they do and be accountable for them to the community, society or even humankind, both today and tomorrow, as regards bioethics, cloning or genetic manipulation, for instance.

It is now time to move on to the great philosophical thoughts in ethics to provide landmarks for approaching contemporary ethical issues. We will cover from Socrates and Plato, the
Fathers of philosophy, to the most influential contemporary ethicist-philosophers. A large number of philosophers question the nature of a good deed and its basis. Our task is to identify those whose thoughts seem the most relevant and interesting. Those that speak to us in our daily lives and have influenced our culture and approach to reality.

We will then look at some of the issues that we are faced with in ethics today in light of these concepts.

2. The Great Thoughts

2.1. Socrates and Plato

Socrates is the founder of Western philosophy as the archetypal philosopher. Plato notably cast him as a character in his dialogues. Without Plato, we would never have known Socrates as we know him today. Socrates, who lived in Athens in the 5th century B.C., did not leave any handwritten texts for posterity.

For Socrates and Plato, good lay beyond sensory reality. As it was beyond the reach of real beings, it belonged to the world of ideas, the suprasensitive world. This concept of supreme good, superior to everything existing in the real world, was an important starting point in ethics. To some extent, this concept presupposed the superiority of ethics over all other disciplines. In addition to changing appearances, there was therefore a reality that was eternal, free of all temporal and spatial contingencies and attainable through the spirit's view. This reality, where, for Plato and Socrates, Truth, Beauty and Good existed, could be reached through human thought, dialectic and a careful search for everything that was common to the various elements of sensory reality.

In Menon, the character of Socrates painted by Plato asserted that virtue, the supreme ethical quality, could not be taught. It could be discovered alone but nobody could pass on ethical knowledge to others through teaching. Socrates had no recipe for acting virtuously, one would be misled to believe the opposite. In this text, he used the example of Pericles, the great Athenian statesman and widely acclaimed man of virtue. In spite of all the advice and the example of his father, his son, Alcibiades, did not succeed in becoming virtuous himself. Having an example to follow or advice was not enough, as virtue was achieved through personal labours and individual quest. And in reality, Reason should be sought by every one of us from within.
2.2. Aristotle

Aristotle was a disciple of Plato, who most influenced the history of ideas. Thanks to his influence over Western thought, he was the third greatest philosopher of ancient Greece after Socrates and Plato. Aristotle wholeheartedly embraced the problem of ethics, and the question of defining goodness, a good deed and virtue. Unlike Plato, he did not seek good outside the material world but in everyday reality. It was essentially in *Ethics to Nicomachus* that he developed his ethical theories.

For Aristotle, a deed was good when it arose from the deliberation of a virtuous man. To illustrate this view, which was deeply rooted in reality, he described different types of individuals and the different virtues of prudence, courage, justice, temperance and even friendship, which he considered to be the foundation of a harmonious life in society. For Aristotle, there was therefore a type of ideal human being, a superior person with all the moral qualities, at their highest level of perfection. This was Aristotle's Magnanimous Man.

For Aristotle, morality was above all a quality of the prudent man. One became a virtuous man with time and the element of luck was not to be overlooked. Aristotle also considered that it was by being virtuous and acting in a good manner that one attained happiness. Virtue led to the supreme state which, according to him, was happiness. Aristotle's ethics was qualified as arete ethics (ethics of virtue) which was the ethics of happiness from moral excellence achieved through virtues — known as "arete" in Greek.

To live a happy life, one therefore needed to be prudent and virtuous, but this was not possible for all individuals (and for Aristotle, this excluded slaves and women). Happiness and virtue could be taught but only to the best, as Aristotelian virtue was aristocratic. The purpose of ethics was happiness, which was only possible in a City with a democratic political organisation of the form seen in ancient Greece.

Happiness was within reach as long as we could act with prudence, making clear-minded choices based on experience. According to Aristotle, by nature humans were rational creatures and by exercising prudence, they succeeded in leading a happy life, as they lived in keeping with their rational nature. Aristotle's ethics was ultimately an ethics of prudence and happiness, wherein deeds had to adapt to circumstances to be good.

2.3. Stoicism, Epicureanism and Cynicism

Three schools of thought from Antiquity that developed at around the same time as Aristotle have been handed down to us through the centuries practically unchanged: Stoicism,
Epicureanism and Cynicism. These schools shared the same source of inspiration: Socrates, the figure of the Athenian sage who strove to live by his thoughts in order to gain wisdom. Their influence subsequently varied but the thoughts have retained their importance in practical philosophy. The ultimate goal of these doctrines was *eudemonia*, i.e. the happiness that humans derived from being true to their nature.

2.3.1 The Stoics

The Stoics considered that we lived in a world over which the individual had no real hold. The leading Stoics were the slave Epictetus and later, the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. Stoicism was cosmopolitanism and Stoics thus considered themselves citizens of the world with no care for conventional laws, believing that humans thrived as part of rational humankind. For the Stoics, social class was of little relevance, as behind the roles of each and every one in society there were always humans who could thus gain happiness. For the Stoics, wishing to take action in order to change the course of the world led to unhappiness and the absence of any glimpse of happiness. Humans were powerless to change the order of things and the order of the universe. Individual will had no hold whatsoever on the destiny of the universe. If, indeed, there was an order of things, humans had to act and pursue the aim that nature had set for them. In this doctrine that advocated asceticism, humans had to live their lives accepting the order of things, their fate, and had even to live in harmony with nature and learn to withhold their judgement. It was through their will that they could aspire to a trouble-free existence. For the Stoics, humans were truly free when they accepted to hand over their will to destiny and world order. By affirming the role of destiny, the Stoics helped the idea of destiny, or *fatum*, to play an important role in Western thought. All individuals, whoever they may be, were thus equal at the mercy of destiny that they were free to face or accept, or not. The Stoic attitude consisted of accepting the order of things rather than wasting energy fighting what could not be fought. It was an attitude of resignation and compliance with one's fate. Epictetus\(^1\) summarised the Stoic philosophy in this way: "Seek not that the things which happen should happen as you wish; but wish the things which happen to be as they are, and you will live a happy life." ("Ne demande pas que ce qui arrive arrive comme tu veux. Mais veuille que les choses arrivent comme elles arrivent, et tu couleras des jours heureux.").

\(^1\) Epictetus, *Manuel* (Handbook)
This doctrine had a genuine influence on ancient Christianity, even though this was denied. It provided Christian religious thought with fertile soil, as it in fact defended a universal idea of humankind and called for acceptance of an order of things that all monotheisms traditionally justified as divine will. Stoicism thus provided a perfect link between Greek thought and Christian Western thought during the first centuries A.D.

2.3.2. The Epicureans
The Epicureans are those that have most suffered from caricature. They have been accused of being the upholders of pleasure and the quest for instant satisfaction. The term Epicurean is often associated with that of Libertine. The doctrine of Epicurus, the founder of Epicureanism, was in reality very different from the one known as hedonism. This ethics was admittedly an ethics of happiness through pleasure, but although it was through pleasure that humankind could be happy, it was especially the eradication of suffering that it sought. Epicurus emphasised that it was not by being led into a frenzied quest for satisfaction of all one's desires that humankind found happiness. The ideal was ascetic: the Epicurean sage had to be content with natural and necessary pleasures, such as satisfaction of hunger or thirst. Epicureanism also taught us to act freely. According to Epicurus, it was not worth suffering for things that we could have no hold on — i.e. fear of death or the gods —, as this would come in the way of our freedom and our possibility of living wisely. Indeed, there was no point in fearing the gods or death since we had absolutely no power over them. Inspired by Democritus and atomic thought, Epicureanism developed the idea that there was an element of chance and uncertainty in the universe that was physically made up of atoms. The Epicureans believed that all beings were composed of atoms. And thoughts and the spirit were made up of smaller atoms than those making up the matter in the world. Epicurus and the Epicureans were thus materialists and managed to build an ethics of happiness and trouble-free existence in keeping with the idea they had of the universe, one of atoms and uncertainty.

2.3.3. The Cynics
The Cynics proposed a radical view of ethics. Like the Stoics and the Epicureans, they sought happiness, in their case through individual happiness. But this was within reach provided that you followed your nature and steered clear of all that was false and illusory placed on the earth by humankind, as this interfered with wisdom and happiness. Cynics did not write, they acted. They challenged social conventions, prejudices, pompous ideas, traditional culture and
theoretical research, their aim being to free the individual from any obstacle in the way of their will to live by their nature and instincts. The most notable Cynical philosopher was Diogenes of Sinope, renowned for sleeping in his tomb in Athens. Many interesting anecdotes have been passed down to us about him and other Cynics, and one of these is particularly relevant. Diogenes was sunning himself under a tree in Athens when the Emperor Alexander the Great walked through the town with his courtiers. The Emperor approached Diogenes, blocking his sun and asked him: "Ask whatever you want of me and I shall grant you your wish." Diogenes then replied to the sovereign: "All I wish is that you remove yourself from my sun." The anecdote is typical of a Cynic, who had no respect for social order, refused the Emperor's favours and thus rejected everything that was unnatural. If his attitude was disconcerting, it was, according to him, because he revealed the true face of humankind.

2.4. Kant

Before Kant and the philosophers of the Enlightenment, the Fathers of the Church defined ethics according to the Bible, striving to act by following divine will. Spinoza wrote *Ethics* and Descartes was concerned with moral issues. But it was above all from the Age of Enlightenment, and Kant in particular, that ethical issues were treated in a decisive manner, influencing the issues raised in moral matters to this very day.

Immanuel Kant is an unavoidable reference when it comes to discussing today's ethical issues. And he sought to establish morality in an absolute and final way.

For Kant, morality was above all a matter of reason rather than happiness, unlike the ethics of Antiquity. By privileging reason, he wholly embraced 18th and 19th century problems, at a time when humankind was furthering its knowledge to take control of nature through science.

By focusing on human reason, Kant plays a central role in contemporary ethical thought.

Kantian ethics was, in fact, an ethics of duty. Acting morally meant acting in keeping with the moral law in each and every one of us. No human being could escape it. Just as for Aristotle, humans were rational beings but according to Kant, it was reason that dictated behaviour, as reason was like an inner voice in every one of us. Kantian ethics was deontic or deontological ethics (from the Greek "deon", meaning duty), unlike eudemonistic ethics which strove for happiness.
Kant\textsuperscript{2} highlighted the three categorical imperatives in ethics that you needed to follow unconditionally since they were directly dictated by what was highest in us, reason: 1- "Always act in such a way that the maxim of your action can be established as a universal law" 2- "Always act in such a way that you are both the lawmaker and the subject of the moral law" 3- "Always act in such a way that you consider the human element in yourself like in others and never solely as a means but always as an end at the same time". Circumstance was never an issue as these three imperatives were unquestionable. They were categorical and humans must never ignore them, they were thus universal. To be autonomous, (i.e. in the strictest sense, act in keeping with the law that one had prescribed for oneself), they had to be applied. But in reality, the moral law set forth by Kant was impossible. He was aware of this but nevertheless asserted that we must subject ourselves to it as rational beings belonging to humankind and therefore outside the boundaries of sensory reality. This point gave rise to numerous criticisms illustrated by Charles Péguy's remark: "Kant's morality has clean hands yet does not have hands." ("La morale de Kant a les mains propres mais elle n’a pas de mains.").

In the case of lies and experimentation on humans, Kantian morality can, however, prove particularly relevant with a view to acting in a morally acceptable way, since it provides a solid and convincing argument which inspired Western thought and is notably found in the very heart of the philosophy for human rights.

2.5. Utilitarianism

On the opposite side to Kantian morality — or almost — lies Utilitarian morality, which is particularly influential in the Anglo-Saxon world. Together with Aristotle's and Kant's morality, Utilitarianism is the third essential doctrine in contemporary ethics. Although often contested, it is highly prized in our world where religious reasoning has ceased to have a real influence on thought. In reality, it reconciles the commonplace idea we have of humankind and the need to adapt it to circumstances to act in a good way. It is, like Aristotle's moral doctrine, a teleological doctrine, i.e. with a view to an end (from the Greek \textit{telos} meaning goal or end), this end being happiness. Thus, it is distinguished from Kantian ethics which is deontic or deontological.

\footnote{Kant, \textit{La critique de la raison pratique} (Critique of Practical Reason) and \textit{Les fondements de la métaphysique des mœurs} (Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals)}
Introduced by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill in the 19th century, Utilitarianism stemmed from Anglo-Saxon tradition. Utilitarian morality was based on the idea of maximisation of good within a given democratic society. For Utilitarianism, an action was good in a society when its consequences were 'less bad' than the opposite action. Happiness was thus to be considered as a whole, and in a society whose individuals were free, the largest number took precedence. If, in a society, an action harmed fewer people than it benefited, then the deed was considered as ethically good. So judgement was based on the consequence of deeds rather than the deeds themselves. In vitro fertilization, for instance, is a scientific breakthrough from a Utilitarian viewpoint and is more useful than harmful for the individuals that make up society. The fact that a couple that cannot have children naturally can now thanks to a technical development is indeed more useful than harmful to society. Another illustration: Abortion. It enables women to live independent lives and no longer suffer from the subservient norms of society and nature. The gain is thus genuine freedom for a vast proportion of the population, and the loss is the elimination of potential individuals, which, naturally, also carries its part of suffering. This morality of general well-being, despite the criticism it has raised in Europe in particular, is a reliable concept in ethics when based on the idea of maximisation of good.

Traditional Utilitarianism presupposed a human nature that was good and naturally tended to be good. And it made a huge leap forward in ethics by evoking the idea of happiness for the greatest number at a time when the democratic ideal was not yet widespread. This was a highly pragmatic ethics that did not require a divine or suprasensitive authority to remain relevant, and, despite its limits, this has made it a doctrine of reference, as it is applicable in all democratic societies where freedom of thought and conviction reign.

2.6. Nietzsche

One philosopher who is often dismissed in ethics and bioethics is Nietzsche, although this is clearly on oversight as he opened up original perspectives for morality. In his own words, he was a philosopher with a hammer. He challenged traditional moral values in enlightening and well-written works with evocative titles such as Beyond Good and Evil, On the Genealogy of Morality and Thus spoke Zarathustra, which was a sort of attempt at a 5th gospel. These works were important in ethical consideration insofar as they questioned the very concept of morality and particularly our traditional morality, which mainly stems from Christianity. For Nietzsche, it was essential for us to create our own individual values rather than have a morality which enslaved humankind to a higher authority, God, and which fed on resentment.
and remorse originating in the submissive instincts present in every one of us. His ethical rule was expressed in the maxim "Become who you are". Virtue, good deeds and charity were questioned insofar as they hindered each human being in their struggle for self-fulfilment.

Nietzsche explained this theory in his text entitled "The Three Metamorphoses". According to him, three stages were required in a human's personal development in order to actually become who one really was. Finding oneself was thus an arduous and demanding personal task but one that was necessary to abandon preconceived ideas, social pressure and thoughts that prejudiced our will to live. A human was first like a docile camel, bending but not breaking under a heavy burden of sin and resentment. It did as everyone did, following the sheep — Nietzsche's reference to the shepherd, flock and lost sheep metaphor in the *New Testament*. The camel was then transformed into a lion, which fought a dragon bearing the words "You must" on each of its scales. This stage alluded to Kantian morality and Christianity. The lion fought and triumphed over the dragon, asserting "I want". These referred to the age-old moral values that were being attacked by the lion, ones that had led to submission of the individual, social submission and above all internal submission. All these values that plunged humankind into resentment, self-hatred and negation of its will for self-fulfilment. Humans must then create new values, their own values to act in keeping, not with, the law imposed on them, but with the vital powers within them. As individuals, they broke free from the spirit of the flock and the values imposed by tradition, by force and over time. The ultimate metamorphosis was the one whereby they again became innocent children, for whom resentment was inconceivable. They then created and shaped their own world. This was Zarathustra's ideal for individuals, the ideal of this hero, who was a kind of new Messiah figure — the apparent opposite of Jesus Christ — created by Nietzsche in this work.

For Nietzsche, morality was therefore essentially an individual matter. This radical subjectivism was really far-reaching and truly merits our attention, as it can be a lesson to us all. Nietzsche even went as far as questioning the very concept of subjectivity. Subjectivity understood to mean interiority, as for Nietzsche the body and spirit were not two entities but a single one that made up the individual. For all these reasons, it would be dishonest to discard Nietzsche's philosophy and cast him as the big bad relativist and the symbol of post-modern contemporary society. He actually forces us to look back at ourselves and the values that we have been taught since our youth, often without our knowing it. His doctrine has too readily been caricatured into nihilism, which Nietzsche hated most of all in reality because nihilism is

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3 Nietzsche, *Le gai savoir* (The Gay Science)
the mere consequence of bourgeois values which stifle the profound being of the individual. Nietzsche's ethics encourages us to get to know ourselves and create our own moral values.

2.7. Emmanuel Levinas

A potentially useful contemporary doctrine is Levinas' "Face of the Other" theory. Emmanuel Levinas was a 20th century French philosopher who explained his fundamental theory of "the Other" and "the Face of the Other" in a series of conversations called *Ethique et Infini*. This theory placed "the Other" at the centre of an individual's concerns. According to Levinas, morality was recognised through one's relation to the Other in face-to-face encounters, as the face was the primaeval locus of ethics. When looking somebody in the face, all individualist perspective was lost; a decisive event occurred. In fact, transcendence and the Absolute were perceived in the "Face of the Other", together with "the Other's" absolute difference in relation to oneself and also their weakness. The seemingly unattainable infinity, that could be imagined in the space, exists in "the Other", and here it was even more fascinating, as what was seen in "the Face of the Other" was humanity regardless of circumstance. I now know that ethics begins here, in "the Face of the Other". Acting in the best way possible means acting in consideration of the Other and their weakness which transpires on their face. The idea of ethics linked to the proximity of the Other and their weakness has considerable scope. How can you act inconsiderately when you become aware of the weakness and absolute nature of human beings?

2.8. Jean-Paul Sartre

The question of choice, which is nowadays an essential ethical question, was conceptualised by Jean-Paul Sartre. Making a decision and taking action was about launching oneself into action. For Sartre⁴, choice was the action which made humankind free and choosing was an action that could not be avoided. Even not choosing was still making a choice. As they were free, humans had to make choices, which always divided them as they had to drag themselves out of their initial passivity and face reality. According to Sartre, there was no totally good choice. To become free, humankind must act and therefore make choices that are never painless. It is impossible to stand with your hands in your pockets and watch the world go round believing that you are on the outside. Even adopting this position amounts to acting and

⁴ Nietzsche, *In Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra* (Thus spoke Zarathustra)
⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (Existentialism and Humanism)
making a choice, this is already exercising freedom in a certain way and therefore bringing your responsibility into play.

To illustrate the idea of moral choices that are always difficult to make but unavoidable, we can consider euthanasia which involves a choice between bringing a patient’s suffering to an end (whether the patient is consenting is not, or conscious or not), or letting them live because there is always the hope of recovery, although his or her present suffering is very real. In this case, the choice to be made is a wrench and echoes the feeling of anguish that, for Sartre, lies at the heart of our existence. For an individual, this feeling is essentially linked to choice. The choice is always difficult, but action must be undertaken to test our freedom which cannot exist outside of the world in any potential way.

2.9. Hans Jonas

At the end of the 20th century, the German philosopher Hans Jonas put forward an argument, known as the "future generations" argument, that was often taken up by others. This philosopher's influence in today's ethical thinking is undeniable, whether one agrees with him or not. The precautionary principle and sustainable development echo this argument and result from Jonas' ideas. For him, all our choices in ethics and bioethics must find moral justification vis-à-vis the future. Not only do we have a responsibility to the present, but also to future generations. According to Jonas, it was not rational to live in the present forever and in a state of consumerism. The situation has become urgent and our responsibility to our children has become vital. For Jonas, the ethics of our time must also look to the future. For instance, nuclear energy poses a problem, as humankind will be leaving behind buried toxic waste for its children and grandchildren.

Jonas presented an overall vision of the earthly heritage that humankind must leave future generations. He therefore had a strong influence over what is known as environmental ethics.

2.10. Jürgen Habermas

Jürgen Habermas has focused on communicational ethics on which ethics committees were based. He argues that rationality can be achieved through dialogue and discussion. The most convincing and rational arguments always win in an enlightened dialogue where individuals

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6 Hans Jonas, Le principe responsabilité (Responsibility Principle)
7 Jürgen Habermas, De l’éthique de la discussion (The ethics of discussion)
are as selfless and sincere as possible. At the beginning of his career, Habermas focused on the study of language and his initial research led as far as discussion and the presence, or emergence, of reason through discussion. For Habermas, language is a tool of human reason but one which, in reality, reveals its existence. As a language philosopher, Habermas extended the scope of his ideas to reach the following conclusion: despite poor uses of language (possibility of lying, referring to nothing concrete, producing paradoxes), it can be a means of expressing reason. Discussions in hospital medical wards around a case requiring ethical decision-making, for example, find their theoretical justification and a new legitimacy thanks to Habermas' work.

Now that the different concepts and apprehensions of ethical issues have been exposed, we can consider new questions. Original problems are also emerging at a time when technology and science are opening up new possibilities for new and at times breathtaking work.

3. A few contemporary issues

The evolution of humankind, human thought, science and its now inseparable corollary — technology — has brought humankind face to face with new issues. It is now time to explain these changes from a philosophical perspective. As, like we said, philosophy cannot provide the answers or metaphysical justifications for human action, unlike religious discourse, it is therefore necessary to clarify the ethical scope in its relationship with science.

3.1. Considering humankind in terms of evolution

The first issue concerns humankind's status after Lamarck's and Darwin's discoveries, the theory of evolution. This scientific discovery, like Freud's discovery of the sub-conscious, is fundamental to humankind and how it regards itself. Evolution's processual understanding of nature has simply knocked humankind off its pedestal. There is no longer an essential or radical difference between humans and their environment. There is no longer humankind on the one hand and the world on the other, with the two linked in an owner/property relationship. Since the discovery of evolution, it is no longer legitimate for humans to want to become the masters and owners of nature in the same way, according to Descartes' 17th century dictum. Accepting the idea of evolution is implicitly revisiting the monotheisms that are based on the idea of *ex nihilo* creation of humans, as the
sons and daughters, and in the image, of God. By assuming evolution, we accept the continuity between the species and therefore the possible overriding and replacement of the human species.

There are two main positions for those who accept the validity of this scientific discovery:

1- The position that regards humans as superior beings despite all else. Because they have access to things other than sensory reality, for example the moral sphere. Humans are endowed with reason and this is what radically differentiates them from other animals. Humans are above the mere order of nature and have access to a higher order. This higher order may also be referred to as culture, as culture is a means for humans to break free from nature, or at least, appropriate it symbolically.

2- The position that regards the human species as an animal species like all others, but with specific features, giving it certain obligations to its own kind and the environment. In particular, we must preserve our species, with all its particular features and evolution. Even if this is at the expense of sacrificing one or more other animal species. However, this does not amount to resorting to survival-of-the-fittest logic, as humans, as social animals, have evolved, and this material and spiritual evolution (culture, art, democracy) must benefit all the individuals of the species too. Humans thus act according to the laws of nature although they are apparently the only ones to have a developed conscience.

These two stances presuppose that the theory of evolution is valid, which is not the case of the non philosophical theory of the Fixists. Fixists do not accept scientific truth for the sake of religious reasons. According to this doctrine, nature is unchanging and human beings are supreme creatures and the ultimate result of the natural process. These radical believers are a minority but their existence highlights humankind's resistance to the idea that it is the centre of the universe. In Europe, we do not yet fully measure the importance of the theory of evolution — in the realm of ideas and our perception of the world — whereas in North American universities, in particular, there are raging debates between supporters of evolution and certain Fixists who, to remain coherent, cannot accept that humankind is part of nature in any other way than as the purpose and product of divine creation without renouncing their religious convictions. In some universities in Texas, when a scientist gives a lecture on evolutionism, some religious lobbies insist that a Fixist lecture be held subsequently, explaining the truth revealed about the origins of humankind. This is, of course, an extreme illustration of the questioning that evolution raises in human beings.
Some time ago, a new theory of Christian and Creationist inspiration (the universe has a creator) emerged, known as Intelligent Design. American universities, such as in Kansas, teach it as an objectively reliable scientific theory (visit http://www.intelligentdesignnetwork.org). This theory is based on an intelligent, and hence spiritual, plan underlying evolution. Some elements of the universe and living beings are believed to possess characteristics that come from an intelligent cause or agent, which is either God or an extraterrestrial life force. Advocates of Intelligent Design strive to unearth evidence of this plan in nature. The problem is that this theory goes against the scientific theories of evolution by assuming a superior intelligence of divine essence that is believed to have directed evolution to, ultimately, make humankind the culmination of natural evolution. The idea of Intelligent Design is merely an attempt to tune recent scientific discoveries to monotheist Christian religion in a discourse that claims to be scientific. But, as it does not provide any proof of a scientific nature, — in particular, this theory cannot be verified by any scientific process — the idea of an intelligent plan of the universe is rejected by the international scientific community and is also a difficult metaphysical theory to accept. Indeed, it presupposes evident Christian postulates: humankind is the ultimate creation, spirit creates matter and a spiritual entity orders the universe. The Intelligent Design theory is in fact a new stage in Christian creationist thought to turn the theory of evolution in its favour. This issue of evolution lies in the background of ethical thought and a reflection on human morality because it answers an essential question, namely the origins and essence of humankind.

3.2. Utilitarianism and relativism

Amid the vast ethical scope that has notably extended further with globalisation, the question that will always be raised is, How should we act? Although extremely disappointing from the point of view of Western morality, Utilitarianism has the merit of being a globally acceptable morality, and indeed seems the most influential when it comes to universal application. Humankind does not need strong suprasensitive support such as a God and creator or a multitude of divinities to act in a morally acceptable way, and this is what lends Utilitarianism its weight nowadays.

But isn't Utilitarianism just a form of relativism? Relativism is a movement of thought in which the truth depends solely on the point of view of the individual, society or culture. There is no absolute, but merely particular cases. As we have seen, Utilitarianism is not relativism. This would be too simplistic a view. In its conventional form, indeed, it puts forward the idea
of naturally good human nature and the maximisation of goods within a democratic society. Without refuting the importance of ethics, it opposes Kantian morality insofar as the latter sets forth insuperable categorical imperatives.

As for relativism, it is considered as a post-modern form of ethics, and virtually as its negation insofar as in the common relativist idea, there are as many ethics as there are individuals. This is regardless of their degree of intelligence, open-mindedness or social position and the fact that, from the point of view of groups of individuals, each society has its own morally legitimate ethics. Lastly, relativism results in total tolerance which can lead to the end of any possibility of life in a democratic society. It may also be considered a negation of thought in that it enables everybody to justify any act whatsoever. This gives rise to the idea that ethical rules have to exist to prevent this failing. Utilitarianism provides some — an action is good if it benefits the largest number — as does Kantian ethics — with its categorical imperatives — and the overall aim of ethics is to find and revisit them through reflection (an exercise in which ideas often take time to mature) and the use of concepts.

3.3. Preserving the environment

Does humankind have a duty to preserve its species above all else or does it also have a duty to preserve the planet? Is there any point in wanting to preserve the environment at any price if it is not to save the human species? Can or should humans take on a role similar to that of museum curators? The questions raised by progress in technology and the increase in market productivity lead to questions about the environmental issue. This is a problem never before encountered in the history of humankind as humans have always considered nature and the environment as inexhaustible and everlasting sources of wealth. Until now, humankind has never questioned the survival of its environment because the environment never really had a hold over it. Today, the ecology issue has entered the political and economic spheres. And it raises important ethical questions now that humankind is itself threatened by the progress it has created. However, it is important to underline the current extent of environmental degradation and to examine our means of action to prevent destruction of the world in which we live. This should be done in a straightforward manner (no religious discourse or discourse of an omnipotent nature), without lapsing into ideology (whether capitalist or environmental), in order to simply act in a clear-sighted and free way and with awareness of the consequences of our actions.
4. Conclusion

To conclude, it is essential to measure the importance of argumentation and choice in both ethics and bioethics; this is what philosophy teaches us. Individuals are forced to make choices of an ethical nature, both as individuals and in their professional lives. We must be able to explain the reasons for our actions and provide explanations that are not merely of an affective nature. Individuals may even act against the laws in force, but they must always be able to justify their actions in a rational manner. This is why it is important to make deliberate, well-argued and clearly expressed choices.

Bibliography


