An Exploration of "Ethics" in a Post-Modern, Complex, Global Society

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OVERVIEW

Literature on the concept of ethics is vast; its rhizomatic roots entwined in ancient and modern societies. In this paper I wish to explore ethics from a post-modern perspective. The Oxford English Dictionary explains ethics in terms of moral principles we, as (rational) humans, have a duty to follow: "a set of moral principles . . . especially ones relating to a specific group, field, or form of conduct" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2013). In short, ethics is a guiding set of principles based on a particular culture or subculture. It is this notion of *a set of principles* constituting the base for moral action that the authors I have chosen find problematic. To understand ethics and its relation to moral acts from a post-modern perspective, I have selected three authors: Michel Serres (French), Paul Cilliers (South African), and Francisco Varela (Chilean). Each comes from a different continent, each with its own language, culture, and historical ethos. All three, though, are united in their belief that our current world culture needs to move beyond what might be called a "traditional" interpretation of ethics.

The three are Michel Serres (1930 --), a French mathematician, physicist, humanist, and avowed chaos theorist; Paul Cilliers (1956-2011), an engineer and philosopher by training, a seminal figure in the philosophy of complexity theory and an avowed opponent of chaos theory, which he sees caught in the modernism he rejects; Francisco Varela (1946-2001), a biologist and co-founder of the Santiago Theory of Cognition who found inspiration in "the wisdom traditions of the East: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism" (Varela, 1999, p. 4). Different as these three are in their backgrounds, they are united in their belief that our post-modern, complex, global society needs a new way to conceive of ethics. For Serres, this is a morality freed from the cultural constraints of ethics. For Cilliers, it is a sophisticated awareness of the complexity inherent in our post-modern world. He advances a "provisional ethics," one without relativism, as his alternative to traditional ethics. Varela makes a distinction between "ethical deliberation" guided by reason, and "ethical expertise" guided by daily experience and practice. All three ask that the concept of ethics and its relation to moral acts be reevaluated, problematized.

SERRES

In his *Conversations with Latour* (1995), Serres explores the concept of morality (pp.167-204). His worry is that with the startling advances in all the sciences, including technology, since WWII, humans have acquired a power before unknown: "We have become masters of

space, of matter, and of life" (p.169). We are acquiring control over the planet on which we live, the atmosphere that surrounds us, and our relations with both life and death. In short, we are "masters of Earth and the world, but our very mastery seems to have escaped our mastery" (p.171). That is, our sense of mastery has come to master us. As our technological advances come faster and faster, as the newer emerges unexpectedly from the new, we have no way to control our speed on the path that leads from a local occurrence "to a global hell" (p.171). What appears possible, a *can* do event, immediately becomes a *must* do (p.173). *Can* is transformed into *must*, with little if any sense of process (process). Serres puts forth the assertion that the atomic bomb, dropped on two Japanese cities—Nagasaki and Hiroshima—at the end of WWII, was done not as a prudent move to end the war, but as a consequence of having been built. Having been built, it needed to be tested, experimentally—not on land or water but on real live people. This, Serres says, represents a "madly logical, rationally tragic" mindset (1997, p.122.)

In conversation with Bruno Latour, Serres comments, "I belong to the generation that questions *scientism*" … that worries about "the relationship between science and violence"—a relation yet to be explored (1995, p.16; emphasis added). This rationally tragic mindset, this *scientism*, comes from our adopting science as the one and only beacon to follow,[2] thereby turning the process of science into the ideology of scientism. Says Serres,

> Knowledge is certainly excellent . . . when it remains cool. . . . Science, assuredly, is just and useful but the way heat is: if it remains mild. Science is good, who denies it, and even, I am sure, one thousand times better than a thousand other things that are also good. But *if it claims that it is the only and whole good* and behaves as if this were the case, then it enters into a dynamic of madness. Science will become wise when it holds back from doing everything it can do (1997, p.122; emphasis added).

Acknowledging the anthropomorphic language used here, and realizing that it is *we* who are the wolves of science—"Western man is a wolf of science" (1983, p.28)—Serres' point is that single sight, or "one-eyed" reason, will lead us to tragedy. Using the metaphor of sailors needing a beacon at night, Serres says that one only "is simply a position, which rapidly becomes a directive, that is imperialistic, necessary, obligatory" (1995, p.178), and our only choice is "obedience" (p.179). Serres believes we need two beacons: the sciences with their sense of exactitude and experimentation, and the humanities with their "continuous cry of suffering" (p.180). The intersection of these two lights, where the objects in the beacons become clearest, is where we can construct our new morality—based on wisdom not ethics. Here we can "weave the warp of the rediscovered humanities to the woof of expert exactitude" (p.184). Such a weaving may well help the sciences, in their activities, acquire "a tolerant wisdom the other instances of power were never really able to learn" (1997, p.122).

In advocating a morality based on wisdom not power, Serres asks that we adopt a new vision and concurrent attitude: ones steeped in humility, and born from weakness—weakness that has the strength of not believing our view to be the *one and only* right view. Traditional ethics—following a culture's guiding principles—binds us to that culture's values, and in this sense is relative: "Ethics depend on cultures and places and are relative" (1995, p.192). They are relative in being bound to a culture, often the culture of the strongest, the one most technologically advanced and powerful. The "reason of the stronger is always the best," asserts the wolf, as he carries off the lamb (of the humanities) "without

any other form of *procés*" (1983, pp.15-16). In the process of the sciences themselves, where rightness is combined with reasonable doubt, not the metaphysics of scientism with its single beacon of reason, Serres sees a moral hope. Morality depends on its obverse, evil (disease, famine, injustice, pain, violence) which is always with us. These evils exist and come to fruition as we live. Our traditional attitude has been to pit ethics against evil, to declare "war" on evil, and to believe we are moral in so doing. This battle, though, is futile. These "evils" cannot be eradicated, to declare war on them only strengthens them. Instead we need to negotiate with them, and in so doing let the power of our weakness come forth (pp.157-204, *passim*). Without evil there is no morality, without weakness there is no strength. Adopting this insight requires a new, educated reason, a reason that is not monocular or "one-eyed," to borrow a phrase from A. N. Whitehead (1967, p.59). Rather, it is a reason informed by the wisdom of the humanities. This hybrid of scientific process (with its sense of objectivity) and human virtue (with its sensitivity to the subjective) yields a morality not constrained by ethical rules, but free to be dynamic in its being, and much needed in our post-modern, complex, global society.

CILLIERS

A "morality not constrained by ethical rules" is a concept both Serres and Cilliers share. Tragically dead of a massive brain hemorrhage, at age 54, Cilliers left an indelible mark on the field of complexity thought, doing as much as anyone to map its shifting parameters and variations. His frequent cry was " Honor the complexity of the complex."

In his later work Cilliers focused on issues of morals and ethics, especially the relation between them. In his seminal book, *Complexity and Postmodernism* (1998), he states that in the future he intends to deal with "ethical issues" in complexity thought. In this book, he lays out the line of thinking he wishes to pursue in the future:

It was part of the dream of modernism to establish a universal set of rules that would be able to regulate our behavior in every circumstance.

But,

Can behavior in accordance with an abstract, universal of rules be called 'ethical' at all? (p.137)

He continues,

Following a universal set of rules (assuming such rules exist) does not involve decision or dilemma, it merely asks for calculation . . . can this be called 'ethical'? What kind of human being would act like this? Clearly, some kind of automaton.

Cilliers sees humans, particularly in a post-modern world, as decision makers, not automatons blindly following set rules. He brings forth this line of thought in a number of chapters and articles (2005, 2007, with Richardson 2001 & 2007) but most forcefully in his last book, co-edited with Rika Preiser*, Complexity, Difference and Identity: An Ethical Perspective* (2010). Here he presents his alternative to the shallowness of traditional ethics. A traditional ethics, emphasizing the following of set rules, hence avoiding the complexity inherent in making a moral decision, is really not ethics at all; it is merely giving "practical moral advice on the contingent matters we face every day." A study of "ethics involves more than everyday morality" (p.265).

The study of ethics from a complexity perspective means understanding the complexity inherent in an event. Traditional scientific thinking, the Western paradigm of good thinking, makes progress by reducing the complexity of an event to make a model of it. This modeling—simple by design—means leaving out the very part of an event that

makes it complex. There is here no "honoring of the complexity of the complex." Cilliers argues that to understand an event, in all its complexity, one "would have to fully understand life, the universe, and everything, now and forever" (2010, p.265). This logical impossibility forces us either to dismiss the complexity inherent in events, or to adopt a new, intellectual paradigm, including a new epistemology (our way of learning), and a new axiology (our way of being) and a new sense of ethics (provisional). This paradigm, while it recognizes the provisional, is not relativistic—not *laisse- faire*. In Cilliers terms, there is no "anything goes." A metaphysics which recognizes the provisional, does honor the history present in an event. This history provides a coupling of the past and the present. Such coupling is generative, allowing the new to emerge from the difficulties and dilemmas found in the past.

A provisional ethics accepts uncertainty as a strategic given. It is radically different from a traditional, *a priori* ethics, from an ethics wherein a moral act is calculated as ethical according to its fit with a prescribed set of principles. A provisional ethics is never relativistic.[3] In its focus on the relational, always changing in a complex system, itself open, a provisional ethics is one where the determination of a moral act depends on choices *we* make. We, personally, are responsible for the choices we make. We are thinking judging human beings, not automatons. Guidelines, though, can be developed to help us in these decisions; guidelines for Responsible Judgment:

1. Respect otherness and difference as values in themselves;

2. Gather as much information on the issue as possible, notwithstanding the fact that it is impossible to gather all the information;

3. Consider as many of the possible consequences of the judgment as possible, notwithstanding the fact it is impossible to gather all the consequences;

4. Make sure that it is possible to revise the judgment as soon it becomes clear that it has flaws

(Cilliers, 2007, p.123)

In this frame for "responsible judgment," incompleteness and uncertainty are acknowledged, and with this acknowledgment the notion of our judgments having the potential of being flawed is accepted. As Serres similarly points out, wisdom begins when we become fearful of the rightness of our own acts (1997, p.122). Operating on this premise, exercising it, using it may help us develop a new sense of *ethics*.

VARELA
In his book on developing *Ethical Know-How* (1999), Francisco Varela begins his first lecture with the statement: "Ethics is closer to wisdom than to reason, closer to understanding what is good than to correctly adjudicating particular situations" (p. 3). Varela develops the power of this statement—a statement I believe Serres and Cilliers would appreciate—in the rest of his book. He goes on to say that traditional "moral philosophy has tended to focus on what is right to do rather than on what it is good to *be* . . . on obligation rather than the nature of good life" (p.3; emphasis added). Advocating "ethics in a nonmoralistic framework" (p.ix), Varela draws on both his view of cognitive science—a complexivist view—and "the wisdom traditions of the East" to bring forth and

develop his notion of "what is it good to be" (p.4). Rejecting Jean Piaget's belief that it is "moral judgment . . . not moral behavior" that should be studied (p.4), Varela advocates study of ethical acts in their complexity, and develops a frame, that of "ethical expertise" (p.23) whereby practical activities—"working, moving, talking, eating"—acquire an embedded sense of being good, or being moral. Focusing on "the difference between *know-how and know-what*, between spontaneous coping and rational judgment" (p.6), and, choosing the former with its emphasis on skilled behavior, he sets himself two interrelated questions to answer:

1. How can one best understand ethical know-how?
2. How does it [ethical know-how] develop and flourish in human beings?

Varela's answer to his first question centers on his phrase "spontaneous coping." Varela cites a number of instances where one often acts in a seemingly spontaneous manner to help others—giving directions, helping a person up who has fallen, etc. Drawing on his theory of cognition, he asserts this spontaneity has a dynamic gap in it; a gap seen easily in animals sniffing before acting. What is happening here, Varela argues, is that the brain is filled with neuronal pathways—10 to logarithmic exponential powers. These pathways overlap and compete, so that when a specific region of the brain or a specific nucleus, say A, "is connected to another region B, then B is also connected to A, *but by a different anatomical route*" (p.46). This different route emerges from competing pathways: "emergent patterns of activity are created out of a background of incoherent or chaotic activity" (p.50). All this happens in milliseconds so as to seem spontaneous, but research Varela cites shows "within the gap there is a rich dynamic involving concurrent subidentities and agents" (p.49).

These emergent patterns arise from the activity going on in an "interneural network" (p.52), and challenge our common belief of an autonomous "self" guiding human actions in a purposive manner. Instead these emergent neural patterns—"selfless selves" Varela calls them (p.53)—operate in a manner similar to insect colonies where the individuals behave as a unit, "as if there were a coordinating agent present at its center"(p.53). He says that development of a cognitive self

> . . . is one of emergence through a distributed process: . . . lots of simple agents having simple properties may be brought together, even in a haphazard way, to *give rise* to what appears to an observer as a purposeful and integrated whole, *without* the need for central supervision. (p.52)

In short, everyday human activities have the potential of developing into "ethical expertise." This development occurs not through adjudicating what is right or wrong in given situations but by striving for the realm of "what it is good to be." Here, as he examines his second question of how to develop *ethical know-how*, Varela brings in his thoughts from Eastern philosophy. Intrigued as I am by Lao Tze's statement that "A man of the highest virtue does not keep to virtue and that is why he has virtue" (p.32), I do not have enough knowledge to follow Varela on the path to "groundless compassion" (p.74). Still there is much to contemplate in what Varela says, even for one grounded in rationalism. The important point for me is the notion that "ethical expertise is *progressive* in nature" (p.63); that "what it is good to be," comes not from adjudicating but from *living*—a good and compassionate life. Such living emerges from everyday acts of spontaneous kindness, is progressive in nature, is akin to Serres sense of having humility as part of our being, and to Cilliers' asking us to honor the provisional and utilize his guidelines for "responsible judgment," which are really guidelines for moral behavior.

CURRICULUM CARRYOVERS

As a curricularist and pedagogue (teacher) I have long been attracted to Wm. Blake's poetic couplet about "single vision" and "Newton's sleep" (his vision of science),[4] penned as the industrial revolution was acquiring steam at the turn of the 19th century. Blake's worry then, and mine now, is that single vision (or Whitehead's "one-eyed" reason) has dominated intellectual (and hence educational) thought for centuries. This vision is that of modernism. After Cilliers makes his comments about "modernism's dream to establish a universal set of rules that would be able to regulate our behavior in every circumstance" (1998, p. 137), he goes on to say "modernism's attempt to structure our existence leads to nothing less than our imprisonment" (p.138).

I fear we have in our curriculum designs and pedagogic practices been so imprisoned, in what Pratt and Trueit (2006) call "teaching-as-telling." The alternative they propose, one suited to our post-modern, complex, global society is "curriculum-as-conversation." This is a powerful concept. In serious conversation, conversation for the Good, each converser listens attentively to the other—indeed honoring the other's "otherness." Each converser speaks from a position of humility, knowing full well that her or his comments may be mistaken. Indeed each teacher in a post-modern frame needs to acquire the art of dealing with the uncertain, not by imposing or dictating authority, but by letting authority be dissipated. Understanding in this frame emerges, is not dictated, is always provisional, and comes from our wisdom of knowing how to let learning occur.

Serres in his book on education, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, (1997), states at the end that his hero, the troubadour, trained in the sciences and the humanities, is

> Reborn, he knows, he takes pity.
> Finally, he can teach. (p.166)

And most of all, he is a moral, possibly ethical, individual.

Notes

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[2] This statement of Serres reminds me of Wm. Blake's famous:
> *May God us Keep,*
> *From single vision and Newton's sleep.*

For the full poem see G. Keynes (1956). "Letter to Thomas Butt, November 1802." In *The letters of William Blake.* For an explanation of Blake's poem, including Newton's sleep, his view of science, see Charles Keil's 2001 Article, "Blake's Four Fold Vision Explained," *The Path Times*, 06/28/2001.

[3] In his 2005 paper, "Knowledge, Limits, and Boundaries," Cilliers comments, "If relativism is maintained consistently, it becomes an absolute positive," thus, he says wryly, "a relativist is nothing else than a disappointed fundamentalist" (p.607, ft.2)

[3] Newton did have visions but they were more alchemical than chemical. Like many of the scientists of his day, he was an "adept," looking for magical formulae and writing more in

this vein (with a strong skew towards the religious) than in any other. There are many biographies of Newton's life, one I like best is Richard Westfall, *Never at rest*: *A biography of Isaac Newton* (1980).

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