

# **HOMO ETHICUS, WHERE WERE YOU?: EMPIRICO-EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS APPLIED TO THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING AND MARGINALIZATION IN THE FUTURE**

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*Empirical studies in demography, which is turning to be an exact science, can actually pinpoint within a small margin of error who will be marginalized, when and where and to what extent will their suffering be. Marginalization and suffering are costs of evolution but the process of evolution itself finds ways to minimize suffering in the process of exclusion. Mankind can utilize cultural by-products like religion and technology in order to answer rationally the question, "Where are you, homo moralis et technicus, in the face of mega-threats that include overpopulation?" Let it not be said that humans fail to minimize suffering when it was in their power to do so.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

**I**n his memoir, *Night*, Elie Wiesel, who as a child was confined in concentration camps together with his family, described a scene. An innocent child is being hanged by the S.S. and as he dies, Wiesel hears a man behind him cry out, "Where is God? Where is He?"

In the divine economy of salvation by a kenotic God, the response is: Yes, God is there with the child, being hanged, too. Ontologically, God could intervene but as disclosed by Christ's paschal mystery, God would not. The more appropriate question would be: "Where is humankind when the boy is hanging?" Obviously in that scene, there are three modes of human presence: that of the murderer, that of the victim, and that of the bystander. The murderer takes the side of Evil; the victim is helpless even if God is on his side. The bystander is the only one who is response-able. If it is in

the power of the bystander to reverse the hanging but chooses not to, then, it can be said, that he is lacking in empathy and compassion (qualities that characterize Christian discipleship).

This paper is exploratory and can be, without intending it, provocative. It presents a tableau, similar to the introductory story, representing the future: agents of suffering, victims, and bystanders. The scenario is an overpopulated world where the victims are the suffering marginalized and the agents of suffering are those whose structures and policies are producing a sector of the population that will be unwillingly marginalized. As these suffer in a metaphorical hanging, a cry is heard “where is humankind?” Where is humankind who has the power to project the future? The assumption here is that empirical studies in demography, which is turning to be an exact science, can actually pinpoint within a small margin of error who will be marginalized, when and where and to what extent will their suffering be.

The purpose of this paper is to search for a theoretical framework that will rationalize the prevention of “wrongful lives,” that is, whose existence would only mean suffering for them and those around them. If there is such a thing as wrongful death, will there be too an instance of wrongful life?<sup>1</sup> This paper does not presume that there is but if there is what can humans do about it? After the philosophical considerations on the issue of genethics, that is, the morality of bringing or not bringing people into this world.<sup>2</sup> I shall attempt to juxtapose philosophical considerations and theological notes concerning God and creation.

### **CLEARING IT FIRST FROM THE TRADITIONAL THEORIES**

Empirical sciences will be able to point out how many people will be marginalized for reasons like, for example, the adverse effects of globalization.<sup>3</sup> If they are potentially wrongful lives because of the necessary sufferings that go with marginalization, can the actually

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1. If there is such a thing as “wrongful death” there is also “wrongful life” as in the case of a child who sues his or her parents for having been born. See David Heyd, *Genethics: Moral Issues in the Creation of People* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 12.

2. *Ibid.*, 22-24.

living persons just do something that will prevent the would-be sufferers from coming into existence? From the perspective of human or civil rights, are the rights of this future people violated if they are not brought into the world? Can non-existing people (after all, they are only potential) have a claim to a right to exist? Heyd says “right based-theories could not supply any such principles, because potential people cannot be said to have a right to be born.”<sup>4</sup> Duty-based theories suffer the same fate. Non-existent beings do not have rights; therefore, no one or no institution has duty towards them. Duty-based theories apply only if we presume that there is someone (usually God) to whom something is due. The only problem with the God thing is that neither natural theology nor revelation-based theology provides a prescriptive advice on the genesis issue, that is, of bringing people into this world. How about deriving the claim of duty from a teleology or goal? The problem here is that goal-based theories would either be person-oriented and, thus, we are back to the right-duty discussion. Settling for an impersonal concept of value for a duty-based theory is not acceptable in many moral circles.

Among modern ethicists, John Rawls needs special mention. His synthesis of utilitarianism and deontology produces a theory of justice based on a hypothetical situation which he calls “the original position,”<sup>5</sup> an imaginary *modus vivendi* of people before there were inequalities and differences. In short, as people live rationally in their ignorance of their differences or simply living in the so-called original position, people would act justly because that would have been both beneficial and valuable for everybody. Here it seems that potential people should be treated fairly and would claim rights. The problem with this is that the moral community is so stretched out that it can even include those who do not yet exist. Rawls’ theory simply sends us back to the rights theories, according to which the future people

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3. See Jimmy A. Belita, *God Was Not In The Wind. An Evolutionary Understanding of Popular Religion in the Philippines* (Manila: Adamson University Press, 2006), 45-46.

4. Heyd, *Genethics*, 64.

5. See Florentino Timbreza, *Bioethics and Moral Decisions* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1993), 47.

have no claims since their coming into the world is not a necessity in the first place.

It looks like the traditional ethical systems based on rights, duties, and utilitarianism are limited in scope when it deals with genesis (the starting of life) and genethics (the morality of bringing or not bringing wrongful lives into existence). Where life is in extremity causing suffering, there is a need for searching for a new framework. As Vincent de Paul says: "Love is inventive unto infinity."<sup>6</sup>

### **THE NEED FOR A NEW MORAL FRAMEWORK**

Humans have to have a morality that is concerned with guiding human behavior so as to minimize unnecessary suffering.<sup>7</sup> Ethical guidelines according to that morality should subsequently follow. System concepts and ontologically based ethics would not be welcome in a post-modern world which has no use for overarching systems and metanarratives. Ethical relations would replace ontological structures as basis of spirituality which gives premium to "the primacy of merciful and compassionate action in face of conditions of life in extremity."<sup>8</sup> Eventually, people might just wake up one morning and realize that explanation through theories would be inadequate in the face of a burgeoning population and population-related catastrophies that need our attention for common survival.

We might have our disagreements on ideology and religion and so these might not prove to be unifying factors in the face of threats to mankind. We fall back ultimately on something that unites us all, our nature of being organisms that connect us to both non-living

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6. Vincent de Paul, *Correspondence, Entretiens, Documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, Vol. XI (Paris: Gabalda, 1920-1925), 146.

7. Although the evolutionary theory of natural selection considers suffering as necessary in the struggle for survival, suffering caused by moral evil (as opposed to physical evil) is not deterministic because of the existence of human freedom. See Paul Thompson, "The Evolutionary Biology of Evil," *The Monist* 85 (2002): 239-259.

8. Marie L. Baird, "Emmanuel Levinas and the Problem of Suffering: The Holocaust as a Test Case," *Horizons*, 26/1 (1999): 73-84. See D. Furrow. *Against Theory. Continental and Analytical Challenges in Moral* (New York/London: Routledge, 1995), 139-160.

and living beings. For decades now, our consciousness has been bombarded by this. I am referring to our biological nature to which our attention has been called by an equally current concern which is that of ecology.

Biological survival and reproduction remain the fundamental and inescapable challenge for all living organisms including humans. An estimated one-third of the current human population worldwide is seriously at risk from malnutrition and severe illnesses. There are “mega-threats” that threaten future survival; they include rapid climate changes, water resource shortages and disease pandemics. These are the new gallows in which many members of the human species would be hanged. Overpopulation would certainly exacerbate these mega-threats and is expected to bring about marginalization and suffering which are by-products of a more basic dynamics of natural selection in the evolutionary process.

While contemporary ethical approaches like deontological, teleological, utilitarian, and so forth, have been found useful for moral decision-making, so much cultural elements have been inputted in them and they are centered on those who already exist. The issue about bringing new life warrants an ethical approach which is so fundamental and even pre-human so to speak. It is an approach that goes beyond the survival of the individual and individuals; it even goes beyond the human species. We tend to think that the moral community has gone too far in making special mentions of women, children, tribal groups, and even animals, plants and the earth as included in the moral circle. But we have another inclusion in the person of the future people who do not even exist yet. If there is an ethical framework that is most inclusive, future-oriented, and prescriptive it will be an ethics that is based on the fact of the evolution which gives rise to evolutionary ethics.

Before anything else, we need to admit that evolution was not well received as a theory; in fact, it was considered a “dangerous idea” by many well-meaning religious people. As if this was not enough; now we are even considering evolution as a paradigm for a moral system. We already mentioned early on the Christian characteristics of empathy and compassion, which are anything except being laws of the jungle, survival of the fittest, dog-eats-dog, etc. In spite of this, I would still like to present an ethical framework that is

evolutionary. The best way to understand a new paradigm based on evolution is first to be sensitive to the signals of new relationships and find clues that lead us to our newly discovered destinies.

## THE WAY OF EVOLUTION

Marginalization, exclusion, predation, and competition for survival which cause suffering are built into the 3.8 billion year history of the Earth.<sup>9</sup> Defective members of the species that endanger its fitness are snubbed or marginalized and won't pass their genes to the incoming generation. What is not fit for survival will eventually be eased out. Lions need energy from gazelles and the gazelles that cannot run as fast as others (due to an unfitness) will suffer from being eaten by the big cat. Death and extinction<sup>10</sup> are the ultimate marginalization. In evolutionist's language, it is neither good nor bad, it simply is. Dinosaur fossils have shown how those great beasts could have suffered in the last throes of death; but death had been wired, too, in their genes.

The planet earth is subject to natural disasters, both of small and great magnitude, causing suffering and even death to many. Natural selection in evolution has made species better fit for survival but there are always trade-offs that cause suffering. "When sentience and feeling arose, and pain became real, it produced evil. When the universe became conscious of itself, in human beings, it produced sin."<sup>11</sup> Whereas non-human animals can only adapt in order to cope with the effect of a form of marginalization, humans, on the other hand, have more repertoires in the adaptation scheme that might even include pre-empting it. Humans, following nature's clue, minimize suffering, too, but are capable as well of not allowing it to exist in some instances. What about if empirical sciences can actually predict

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9. Denis Edwards, "Resurrection and the Costs of Evolution: A Dialogue with Rahner on Noninterventionist Theology," *Theological Studies* 67/4 (2006): 816-833.

10. More than 99% of all species that ever lived are now extinct. See Jerry D. Korsmeyer, *Evolution and Eden. Balancing Original Sin and Contemporary Science* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1998), 85.

11. Ibid.

who will be marginalized, where and when; can humans do something so they (potential marginalized) would not exist and therefore preclude suffering?

Evolutionary ethics has to go empirical in the call for a true and evidence-based assessment of the past and a proactive and practical planning for the present and the future. Ethics that is empirical ultimately aims at making ethics more context-sensitive, more feasible and doable in particular contexts. With no dependence on metaphysics, the empirico-evolutionary ethics starts from the intuitions and from the shared understanding of a particular community or of those who participate in a communal practice.

“Thus an evolutionary ethics – an ethics that serves our common survival and reproductive interests – is indispensable; it is essential to the functioning of a complex modern economy and society.” However, we should avoid the fallacy of naively extrapolating patterns of evolution from the past and apply them into the present or future. The past mechanisms of adaptation for survival contained a lot of wisdom, then, but they might not be adequate today in view of new experiences and new technologies. Evolutionary biology, creative as it is, has recently undergone a major paradigm shift as “group selection” theory and has opted for the role of organized social groups<sup>12</sup> in human evolution and, later, of cultural evolution.

Humans are unique in the evolutionary world in that in many instances they have moved from natural evolution to cultural evolution. The emergence of the mind and spirit has somehow shifted adaptations from the biological elements to the creations of new forms which fast track human adaptations. The human personality is no longer just the sum of its parts but the creative interaction between the human and the surroundings. Humans are no longer simply waiting for change but initiate it; no longer simply waiting for the world to change but transform it through knowledge and technology. Human technology can actually reverse extinction also by a more conscious managing of life. It can also minimize suffering, although we are still skeptical as to its total removal. But *homo sapiens* may be able to preempt it by not bringing wrongful lives into existence.

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12. David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral. Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

In a scenario of an overpopulated world that produces the suffering marginalized no one will no longer shout, “Where is God?” (after all, God’s self-delimitation would not allow the Godself to intervene). The shout would rather be, “where is humankind?” Humankind, with all the information and capability to envisage the future, including a portion that would be suffering as a result of marginalization and alienation, without doing anything to forestall it, would be likened to a bystander who could have done something to save an innocent life but refused.

### **PRE-EMPTING “WRONGFUL LIVES” AND THE LAW OF NATURE**

Would pre-empting wrongful lives violate the law of nature? The law of nature was traditionally derived from observing patterns in it, which ultimately were attributed to the divine law and, therefore, to God’s will. The “oughts” of norms followed the “is”, a naturalistic fallacy called by evolutionists. The theory of natural law served a purpose in people’s moral world; for if the laws are written in nature, no human power, not even the Church or the State, can arbitrarily proclaim directives that might even go against society’s and individuals’ welfare. Would pre-empting wrongful lives violate the law of nature because according to its logic nature should have its course and humans should not interfere? According to common observation, even nature itself pre-empts lives when changes spell unfitness for future generation. For example, colorful moths living in dark areas would simply die away because their bright colors would give them away to birds of prey; black moths, on the other hand, survive because their dark color is a fitness. It can be argued, therefore, that, if nature itself makes a beneficial adaptation, why not humans do the same to anticipate what is fit for the whole human species.

If natural law in the past was derived from observation of the patterns of nature, so is it also today except that we know better now what really is nature. Taking our clue from nature that we observe scientifically, we realize nature is evolutionary. Evolution is nature’s way and, according to a believing evolutionist, the God of nature is its enabler. Subscribing to the law of nature is to believe in a God who enables nature, including humans, to be. In the pattern of a God of evolutionary nature who, even in the face of human evil,



does not intervene, the Divine Self is the source of power for humans' conscious cultural evolution. The author of *Evolution and Eden* writes: "The magnitude of the universe in space and time indicates that nature is God's great work. Whatever God's plans, they are being worked out in continual creation over billion of years and unimaginable distances. Now on earth, with the emergence of human beings, evolution has become aware of itself. We can try to ascertain the divine purposes and to aid them. We have the opportunity to become God's hands. In our own small way we can be "co-creators of values revealed and discovered."<sup>13</sup> If this is what is meant by "playing God," humans need not apologize for the game of life.

### **"PLAYING GOD" IS A HUMAN MANDATE**

We might now have a new way of interpreting the so-called "playing God." In the past, the expression, "playing God" was interpreted pejoratively and critically as the humans' overstepping of one's designated role, "an illegitimate interference with an antecedently given natural design."<sup>14</sup> On a positive note, "playing God" is understood as "absolute power of constituting the world in the light of one's goals and interests."<sup>15</sup> There is rationality in "playing God" in the light of humankind's interests including the interests that humans want their children to have. As Heyd concludes, "Not to play God as an attitude of cosmic modesty toward the 'natural' course of events is an irrational (as well as often immoral) approach no less than refraining from using agriculture to produce food or medicine to heal people."<sup>16</sup> Would this not contradict an assertion that God is not an interventionist in both human and cosmic events? It is not necessarily contradicting if we still subscribe to the belief that God is still the creator even if S/He merely enables creation to become, including subduing it, as God in the bible commands.

Denis Edwards avers, "Christian theology today must face up to how a particular theology of divine action that runs deep in the

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13. Korsmeyer, *Evolution and Eden*, 86.

14. Heyd, *Genethics*, 7-8.

15. Ibid., 7.

16. Ibid., 208.

Christian tradition can exacerbate the pain of those who suffer because of its implicit model of an interventionist God, who chooses freely to send sufferings to some and lovingly to protect others.”<sup>17</sup>

Another requirement for a theology to respond to the costs of evolution involves “an understanding of God’s power as constrained by God’s love and respect for creatures.”<sup>18</sup> We get this view of divine power as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, especially his death and resurrection. The cross offers a unique revelation that divine power is disclosed in the “transcendent divine capacity to give oneself in love.”<sup>19</sup> The same cross does not point to divine absence but rather to the offer of true love in the form of radical vulnerability. It is therefore a love that lets be, allows nature to work out its fulfillment, waiting upon creation and accompanying creatures in their sufferings, healing wounds, and celebrating with the blessed.

## CONCLUSION

This paper is meant to explore or even provoke a very sensitive issue that borders on equally sensitive issues like eugenics, contraception, and abortion. But I would like to reiterate that these are separate issues although with implications that overlap. Marginalization and suffering are costs of evolution but the process of evolution itself finds ways to minimize suffering in the process of exclusion. We also have to be reminded that cooperation and inclusion are also evolutionary schemes that add fitness to human existence, even if the process shifts once in a while from genetic evolution to cultural evolution. Empirical data, professionally analyzed, can easily point to who will be marginalized and, therefore, will suffer. Humankind can utilize cultural by-products like religion and technology in order to answer rationally the question, “Where are you, *homo moralis et technicus*, in the face of mega-threats, that include overpopulation?” Let it not be said that humans fail to minimize suffering when it was in their power to do so.

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17. Denis Edwards, “Resurrection and the Costs of Evolution,” 817.

18. *Ibid.*, 818.

19. *Ibid.*