

Trumpeter (1996)
ISSN: 0832-6193
About the Knowledge of Good and Evil

Victor Prochaska
Trumpeter

VICTOR PROCHASKA is a retired forester who lives a life of voluntary simplicity in British Columbia.

As events past and present show, the essential infrastructures of a society are not roads and information superhighways - but ethics - a system of values, that enables people to live harmoniously with themselves, their environments, and their gods.

Who is *Homo sapiens*, and what is his/her role in the universe? Sapiens is a bit of a misnomer. Only a few people think deeply and clearly, some hardly at all, most muddled, just regurgitating obsolete "facts". But regurgitation presupposes memorization, and some scientists claim that it is memory that makes man/woman unique among species, maybe so. However, memory is selective and often conveniently forgets, or remembers the wrongs things, and besides, some animals certainly remember too. Another claim is for exclusiveness is free will. Yet, there is no consensus, and Libertarians have battled Determinists for hundreds of years with no obvious winner. The truth, as in most cases, is likely to be in the middle.

Yet, *Homo sapiens* is unique, and it is difficult to imagine that God, or evolution, or both, would have gone to all the trouble just to feed bugs and worms. Who else among the creatures has such capacity for creation and destruction? Who else is so compassionate, so cruel, so multifaceted, so contradictory, so complex, constantly changing and yet always remaining the same?

In Judeo-Christian tradition the hallmark of *Homo sapiens*, though - alas, fallen - is the knowledge of good and evil. But again, this is a fuzzy criterion. What is good for one is often bad for the many, and what seems bad today may be good in the long run. Then there are some degrees of good and evil from mild to deadly, and, to complicate matters further, the concept varies from person to person, place to place, and time to time.

The lucky grass, the ant, or bird, even "higher" creatures like monkeys don't waste time with speculations of this sort. They are guided by genetic knowledge, by instinct, and are thus above sin and responsibility. Not that people have no instincts at all, but they have the potentiality to override them, and this is where the problems arise.

Gods, sages, philosophers and rulers were aware of this millennia ago, and passed laws and dicta. The "Thou shalt not kill!" or "Thou shalt not steal!" of the Bible. The Buddha's "If there is a deed, Rahula, you wish to do, reflect thus: Is this deed conducive to my harm or to other's harm, or to that of both? If the answer is "yes", you must desist from such a deed." Then there is Confucius who said in his *Aphorisms*: "Do not do unto others what you do not want others to do unto you." And Kant wrapping it all up in his categorical imperative: "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it

should become a universal law." All of them valid, but all of them primarily concerned with our social interactions and not the environment which we must exploit to shelter and feed ourselves.

Hunger, for instance, is a useful instinct and without it most of us would starve to death. But with it, a lot of us overeat and get fat and sick. So we have to use our knowledge of good and evil to control the urge, to keep a healthy balance. As with hunger, so with thirst, the sex drive, and all acquisitive drives, and not only for the sake of our individual well-being. Because, *what we eat someone else cannot eat*. In a world of plenty who cares? But life rarely lives in a world of plenty. It is a characteristic of life that it expands to the limits of its own sustainability within certain conditions, and changes the conditions as it does so. Plants, animals, people, all constantly probe the boundaries of their territories, displacing the unfit, the weak, the old, or being displaced themselves. There is an inherent creativity *cum* destructivity in life *per se*, since all life feeds on life, but more dangerously so in life unrestrained by instinct.

Knowledge of good and evil entails responsibility for our actions and omissions, and the more knowledge a person has, the more responsibility he/she ought to assume. Moreover, as the only potentially knowledgeable species, *Homo sapiens* is thus responsible not only for his/her own well-being, but for the well-being of the environment and ultimately the whole planet. This concept, that is becoming more and more obvious in our times, has been around for millennia. It was part of shamanism, of most mystical traditions and became incorporated in one form or another into several religions. It is intrinsic in the ideas of "offering", "sacrifice", "atonement", and "chosen people". Ashkenazi Jews, resigned to the humility and the cruelties of their existence, considered themselves God's hostages for the redemption of mankind: "The world is judged by the majority of its people and an individual by the majority of his deeds. Happy is he who performs a good deed (mitzvah): that may tip the scale for him and the world", said Fleazar ben Simeon. But the clearest formulation of this is in Hopi mythology:

The Hopi also think that they have been charged with fulfilling a unique spiritual duty: to walk hand in hand with all life towards stability and healing on a worldwide scale. They think that if they fall prey to lethargy and decadence, they will be destroyed and with them all life on earth. The destiny of the planet is in their hands and they, together with all mankind, stand at a crossroad, facing the choice between responsibility and selfishness, whether to be or not to be - a critical time which was predicted to the Hopi by their deities in the distance past.¹

But how, in our "age of reason", of science and technology can a truth such as this be proven, and lead to an all encompassing eco-ethic? Metaphysics would help but is not admissible evidence, so we will try Deep-Ecology. If we accept

its premise that everything is connected in space and time, and in a dynamic balance - and that this balance is good - then it follows that *all harm done by a part to another part will negatively affect the whole in accordance with the amount of imbalance caused*. For example: We can eat an apple off a tree without compensating the tree in return and get away with it. But eat a hundred apples without returns (fertilizers) and the tree will suffer deficiencies, and if the practice continues it eventually dies. To unbalance is to harm. If a product is utilized, compensation must be paid to the next higher level of organization, in our example the tree. If, say, the tree is harvested, compensation is due to the orchard or forest.

But what if a forest is harvested? Or a field of wheat? And what of resource extraction, of oil, gas, metals and minerals? How do we compensate all the harmed parts, the animals and plants whose habitats are destroyed, or altered as a side effect? The symbolic compensations, the sacrificial rites of times past were not, as history shows, sufficient, and those exploitations were minuscule compared to ours. How can we compensate a mountain, a watershed, a biosphere? We can, to a degree.

We pay lip service to sayings like: "There is no free lunch," and routinely compensate the next higher level of organisation in our business deals. Consumers pay the retail store, the store the wholesaler, the wholesaler the producer, the producer the resource extractor. But there the buck stops. From there on it's "free goods", "externalities". Wrong. Now we are at the core of the matter, and the fact is that we unbalance, rape, and rob the planet. We are the 5.8 billion people who, even at the present unfair levels of consumption, gobble up almost half the caloric output of the biosphere - and with total disregard for other life forms.

The problem is quantitative. Small is beautiful and big is ugly and harmful. So the numbers of consumers and levels of consumption have to be drastically reduced to give each part a fair share of the pie, and make it easier to compensate. In the meantime it will be tough, but compensate we must. To quote Confucius' *Aphorisms* again: "Tse kung asked, 'Is there one single word that can serve as a principle of conduct for life?' Confucius replied, 'Perhaps the word *reciprocity* will do.'" So reciprocate cum compensate with what? With energy equivalents, of course, just as our red and green blooded cousins, the animals and plants do. The apple tree, after giving away oxygen and fruit, return its materials to the soil it grew from. The animals do the same through their wastes and bodies. They are all parts of the natural re-cycles, well proven for millennia, and arrogant men/women are the only ones claiming exception.

Energy equivalent compensation may not be as dystopian as it seems at first glance, although there are situations when it becomes impossible to compensate. This means, we should not use the produce, and the burning of hydrocarbons falls into this category. Exceptions aside, we could, given a transition period, convert back to organic agriculture, to small scale selective logging, to renew-

able energy sources, etc. For metals we can mine the scrapheaps and landfills, and with highly efficient processes manufacture high quality, long lasting and reusable goods only. The technology for most of the above exists, what is lacking is implementation on an appropriate scale. And, by creating a fair distribution system, life in a "compensating world order" would be more pleasant than in the violent, dog eat dog, present.

It was civilized man/woman who "fell", who sinned, and not by acquiring knowledge of good and evil - but by not exercising it, by stealing the apple. Assuming that *Homo sapiens* was not a freak accidental mutation, but has a function in the overall scheme of things like everything else, we will survive.

Perhaps our consciousness had to evolve to the stage where we know good from evil, not anthropocentrically but biocentrically, and thus freely *will* good for Life. And maybe it is the energy generated by this *good willing* that feeds good spirit entities, as wishing evil can put a hex on things in Voodoo. All through the food chain the feeder knows the value of the fodder, but the food does not recognize its own value. Sheep know the value of grass, grass does not. Wolves know the value of sheep, but sheep do not know their own value, and neither does humankind. Yet, the *Upanishads* say "He is a beast for the Devas. For verily, as many beasts nourish a man, thus does every man nourish the Devas." Religions insist that we love God, serve God, submit to God. Is extending the food chain into the spiritual realm, and giving meaning to our lives by feeding the Devas too wild a speculation?

This may, or may not, answer the initial questions: "Who is *Homo sapiens*, and what is his/her place in the universe?" "Do only little harm, and reciprocate for all harm you do." This may not be a new dictum about good and evil, that we as individuals or societies ought to follow, but it is a start. And, as Zoroaster said, "In the end the good will win, because evil has no foresight."

Note.

1. Corry, Stephen. *Guardians of the Sacred Land*. London, U.K. Survival International, 1994

Citation Format

Prochaska, Victor (1996) About the Knowledge of Good and Evil *Trumpeter*: 13, 2.
<http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.13.2.7>

Document generated from IXML by ICAAP conversion macros.
See the [ICAAP](#) web site or [software repository](#) for details