

Opening address  
Forum on Global Ethic  
Interfaith Multicultural Forum  
Brisbane, November 5, 1995

### Mind of God Ethics

It is a pleasure to share in your thoughts today on the global ethic, and I am grateful to my valued colleague Uri Themal for the invitation to speak again to the Interfaith Multicultural Forum. I personally support the Forum's aims particularly as they are expressed in today's topic.

For me the global ethic is not one among others, but a personal preoccupation and a professional commitment. Undergraduate teaching in Applied Ethics at Griffith is based on its precepts. We present the precepts as an aspirational goal for personal and public ethical orientation, and we try to ensure that students are well grounded in the ethic's vocabulary, concepts, and history. Uri is aware of this because he is one of the outside speakers we bring in to lecture.

I imagine that it might be of interest to hear some impressions of student response to our program; for it is an indicator of opinion, however local and limited.

About 800 students enrol in twelve subjects offered in five of the university's faculties. Of that number, about 35 are pursuing an applied ethics major. The enrolments concentrate in the Humanities and Science faculties.

It is fair to say, I think, that the global ethic does not really have a rival among these students. Its vocabulary and norms are familiar from the high school curriculum and from public affairs. All know—or know when reminded—that human dignity, rather than particular traits such as gender or nationality—are the basis for good conduct in public and private life. Students who come to us from developed ethical or religious backgrounds—and something over 50

percent do—perceive the curriculum as corresponding to their moral sense rather than as at cross-purposes with it.

Our Masters program is also based on these concepts, but its focus is the professions—that secular priesthood of the modern world. There are about two dozen students, most with five or more years experience in middle level management. >>I might mention that in February a new cohort of MA students will commence study.

If the global ethic has crossed the threshold to self-evidence among students, and in a state that so recently was an ethical backwater, can it be read as a sign that global consciousness needs only time and continued nurturing ultimately to prevail?

The answer, I think, is Yes. Not a hesitant Yes but an emphatic Yes. The reason is that the global ethic is ingredient to the globalisation process, which is in turn the latest instalment of cultural evolution that commenced thousands of years ago. If we plot the growth of cultural complexity as a curve, it rises steeply about 2000 B.C., levels back to a modest upward slope, and then begins a very steep slope around 1500 A.D. The numerous material and human catastrophes since 1500 have not interrupted the upward climb. In fact, they register only when the graph is fine-tuned to decades rather than centuries. No one nation, or club of nations, can turn the process from its path. Globalisation is, so to speak, the will of God, the fate of numbers, the karma of modernity, as you will.

A small indicator of the karma could be seen in a news bulletin from Tehran several months ago. The mullahs, wishing to protect piety from western values, banned satellite television antennas. There was a popular uproar. The bulletin mentioned in passing that the most popular program in Iran is . . . *Baywatch*.

For a moment, I do admit, I was sympathetic to the mullahs. But on reflection I thought that it could have been worse. The preferred program might have been that show case for bitchy back-stabbing and up-market selfishness, *Melrose Place*. Although *Baywatch* is a skin parade, the young

and beautiful heroes are altruists rescuing people in trouble, regardless of their sins. Not so bad. Perhaps even a lesson for the mullahs.

The global ethic will win through given time. But there's the rub. Time is what we may not have enough of.

The Declaration Toward a Global Ethic frequently draws attention to the time factor. We are reminded that we may be on short rations. Environmental degradation has possibly entered a threshold phase that could, over the next century, cascade into collapse of agriculture and crippling water shortage. Add to that the population explosion. A century ago world population was one billion. Today it is nearly six billion. The birth rate speeds toward eight billion in another quarter century, despite all efforts to contain it.

These signs, to mention no others, flag the possibility that economic growth relative to population size may stall and enter a retrograde motion. Such an outcome would disrupt the globalisation process because the natural response to scarcity, or the threat of scarcity, is reversion to localism and ethical Balkanization. Such is the commonly accepted scenario. But another is possible. Globalisation might continue, but now under the auspices of an anti-ethic. I mean deliberately casting off, as intolerable, the burden of compassion, and rationing the goods of life, including human dignity, according to perceived worth of favored groups. This anti-ethic is called social Darwinism, fascism and other names.

What spiritual resources do we find in the global ethic to face with equanimity an open future?

Under the heading, Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life, the Declaration enjoins, in addition to respect for human life, respect also for animals and plants. The web of life, we are told, is interdependent. We are to relinquish the image of ourselves as masters of nature, and also the impulse to dispose of nature as we please. The conquest model of the human relation to nature has resulted in the despoliation of the planet, which in the long run—or maybe in the near future—is our undoing. The

Declaration says instead that we must “cultivate living in harmony with nature and the cosmos.” This, to me, goes to the core of mind of God ethics.

The conservation movement began about a century ago, in the United States, where it was urgently needed. Reafforestation and setting aside large tracks of land in national parks were among the first fruits. However, conservation did not at that time take hold in the broad mass or even among the intelligentsia. Indeed, the intelligentsia nourished grand schemes for the conquest of society. One influential voice from the Thirties, who supported the nature/society conquest analogy, had this to say about nature:

“we [now] determine what wild life we will keep; we can wipe out all forms of animal or vegetable life that exist; we can sow what seed we want, and kill or breed what animals we want. There is no longer a biological environment in the Darwinian sense to set our problem . . . those forces which affect the life of the [human species] and can conceivably change it in the Darwinian sense have come under [human] control . . . [the process of uncontrolled organic evolution is at an end].”

It's hard to know what to wonder most about in this statement, its arrogance or its ignorance. The author, George Herbert Mead, was on good terms with a leading ecologist, W. C. Allee. Allee and others were even then sounding warnings familiar today, but Mead and his generation had no ears for them.

Another example of mailed fist science was the notion that animal and human behavior were to be understood by forcing small animals into cages where they could be jabbed and shocked until they obeyed the experimenter. If someone were to say that human psychology is best understood by torturing prison populations, and recording their responses to conditioning, the madness would be apparent. Yet for three generations this was essentially the research agenda of behaviorist psychology. It never occurred to them that animals might display one set of behaviors for cages and quite another set in their natural habitats. So what is purported to be the science of behavior is better described as the science of animal coping with solitary confinement in electrified cages.

While such attitudes toward nature and animals continue today, they are no longer command broad public support. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, touched off a great change in public awareness of the interdependence of humankind with the environment, and of our collective and individual obligations to plants and animals. It is gratifying that the Declaration's pronouncements on these questions require no subtle reasoning to support them. Any doubts about that were answered by the spontaneous response here and overseas to French nuclear testing.

Environmental awareness is to my mind the threshold to ethical renewal because it awakens a dimension of consciousness that has been denied or disparaged during the era of nature's conquest. That dimension is our intuitive, multi-focal resonances with nature—with its beauty, its majesty, its comforts, and yes, its terrors. Every gardener, bushwalker, nature photographer, farmer, naturalist and pet owner is attuned to one or another of nature's many songs. The gardener is a nurturer, and is nurtured in turn by her plants. The bushwalker, by contrast, returns to nature in its uncultivated state, to experience its vigor and its ever changing spectacle. Through such concrete experience, the words "responsibility" and "interdependence" acquire living definitions more meaningful than the dictionary can say. We learn that responsibility's voice is not a command pronounced from afar, but the whisper of an inward affinity.

Naturalist E. O. Wilson calls it "biophilia"—the human bond with other species. In his book of that title, Wilson describes his communion with nature in the rain forests of Latin America. His special fondness is for insects, particularly ants and termites. Once when visiting him in the Museum of Comparative Zoology, at Harvard, I was shown the bins where various ant species were carrying on with the kinds of things that ants normally do. As he commented on the leaf-cutter ants, I fancied that a cluster of them waved and said "G'day Ed.". When I jokingly mentioned this, he winked and said, "Yes, they know me. But I can't publish that."

Someone, I believe the architect Mies van der Rohe, says that "God is in the details." If this is true for the arts, it is even truer for nature. By getting to

know nature in some aspect of its myriad detail, attention is shifted from the self to the Other. Whether that Other be leaf-cutter ants or geraniums or a patch of coral reef, it expresses one episode of what Paul Davies, reviving a natural theology tradition, calls “the mind of God.”

Davies’ television conversations with Phillip Adams are a fascinating lesson in the attempt to communicate a very simple thought to minds captured by conquest-of-nature thinking. Davies is saying: “Well Phillip, humankind is not in charge. Our species and its history are a minor event in earth history. We are but one of millions of species. When it comes to the cosmos, well, we are close to nothing. Not absolutely nothing, but close. So we need a consciousness appropriate to our place in nature. Mastery isn’t the right answer.” Adams, missing the point, asks Davies about our chances of escaping oblivion from an asteroid impact.

Davies is also saying that to look into nature is to know a fragment of the mind of God; and to know that fragment is to know God. Phillip does his best, his face tensing in the effort to grasp the concept. He misses out because the God that Davies is talking about isn’t a concept. Despite Davies’ reminders that he is talking about the God of religions, Mr. Adams thinks that he must mean the God of physicists, not noticing that physics merely happens to be Davies’ language of experience. Ornithology or entomology would do equally well. So would the language of the Buddha, who teaches that to experience God, we must obliterate desire. That means the obliteration of ego. Nature conquerors have trouble with that. Especially physicists of the last century. One of the luminaries, Hermann von Helmholtz, characterised physics as the mind’s “grappling victoriously with time and space and the forces of the universe.” That triumphalism has been replaced today by talk about the “science of complexity.”

The schools of philosophical ethics dominant today derive from nineteenth century thought and express the conquest idea. Utilitarianism and Kantianism project an eventual victory over ignorance and immorality. This is mind of man ethics, predicated on the belief that what we as individuals and groups consciously undertake to do will determine outcomes.

Mind of God ethics, by contrast, says that the course of the world is what it is independently of human will. Not that choices have no influence, but rather that the influence is already factored into the course of the world. This is true not only of ethical choice, but unethical choice as well. All choices, then, are compatible with the course of the world. Ethical triumphalism is a local event, like the splendour of kings and potentates who believed that they built for all times. Triumphalism is not a phenomenon characterising the course of the world. And why? Because from God's point of view, the world course, in each of its moments, is as full of goodness as it can be. To use the phrase of natural theology, God created the best of all possible worlds. It is the best because no other world is possible.

Mind of man ethics doesn't like this idea. In his satire *Candide*, Voltaire put the teaching into the mouth of a philosopher, Pangloss, who was given to saying at every turn of misfortune, it is the best of all possible worlds. Practically everyone agrees with Voltaire that Pangloss is a bumptious idiot. Nevertheless, after two centuries of improving the world according to the mind of man, the case can be made that the outcome could not be worse for the future of civilization as we know it. Overpopulation, environmental degradation, the greenhouse effect, and so on with the present and expected evils mentioned in the Declaration.

Let me close with a thought from the Book of Job, which throws in high relief the difference between mind of God and mind of man thinking about human weal and woe. Job has suffered all manner of afflictions, despite being a faithful servant of the Lord. He has been counselled by friends and taunted by foes. The question of Providence, or want of it, has been canvassed. Finally God speaks to Job from out of the whirlwind. God says (Chap 38)

Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you will answer me. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

Job comes to understand his arrogance in measuring divine wisdom according to his own. He revokes the curse he had placed on the day of his birth and praises the Lord.