The End of Philosophy?

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What disciplines or frameworks of thought are most relevant to our current humans and nature sustainability crises? Perhaps scientific knowledge alone, without any emotional wrappings, enables us to take a more objective, longer-term view of issues such as climate change, landscape degradation, and waves of species extinctions. If we do turn to disciplines such as ethics and philosophy, will they be reliable guides or will they lead us to exaggerated, emotional reactions? I have heard these kinds of questions a number of times—from people in many different walks of life, from distinguished scientists to interested citizens.

An alternative perspective argues that reason and philosophical deliberation have little to do with our choices because our emotions largely dictate our decisions and actions. As David Brooks argues, in his April 6, 2009 New York Times column, “The End of Philosophy,” moral thinking is “more like aesthetics...You don’t have to decide if a landscape is beautiful. You just know. Moral judgments are like that. They are rapid intuitive decisions and involve the emotion-processing parts of the brain. Most of us make snap moral judgments about what feels fair or not, or what feels good or not. We start doing this when we are babies, before we have language. And even as adults, we often can’t explain to ourselves why something feels wrong. In other words, reasoning comes later and is often guided by the emotions that preceded it.”

The case for the importance of ethics, emotion, science and/or philosophy in approaching difficult choices about how we ought to live on earth should not be a case for exclusive jurisdiction. All of the disciplines bring insights into challenging dilemmas. Ethics, emotion, science, and other forms of knowledge should not be set in opposition to each other as an either/or choice for rational, thoughtful people.

One problem with David Brooks’ approach of giving primacy to emotional response is that he fails to acknowledge the concurrent development of emotion and knowledge, both of which work together to create meaning and intuitive decisions. In other words, the emotional development of human beings does not occur in a vacuum. A baby feels angry when the sharp knife she was holding is taken away. It feels unjust to her, but as she grows older and her knowledge expands, she recognizes that taking a knife away from a baby is not unfair, but in fact the very opposite; it is the right thing to do. The child’s growing understanding of the world around her is the key to this diametric shift in emotional response.

Interestingly, Brooks relies (as do others) on the evolutionary paradigm to justify his position of emotional primacy. “What shapes moral emotions in the first place?” he asks. “The answer has long since been evolution….“ Brooks acknowledges that the evolutionary process has brewed up morality, so to speak, including the development of noble emotions such as cooperation, loyalty, and respect. However, he then uses this as a jumping off point for discarding philosophy and informed choice, giving emotion central (though not absolute) primacy in how we choose to live our lives.
Like many others, Brooks has failed to consider some of the most important insights of the evolutionary paradigm, which if taken seriously, would preclude him from discarding the importance of philosophic thinking. Most importantly, acceptance of an evolutionary world view includes the knowledge that we are members and kin to all life within an interdependent community. Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic captures the revolutionary nature of this idea, which “changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it.”

One might still argue, haven’t species emerged and gone extinct countless times over the course of the earth’s history? And hasn’t our climate fluctuated dramatically during this same time? Why should it matter if we humans are the cause of these changes? Who is to say that this is not our evolutionary role? And why should we care? These questions follow the line of thinking that we should put morality aside altogether because evolution, driving the fundamental processes resulting in the emergence of life and extinction of species, should be allowed to “take its course.”

However, we humans are currently not doing that at all. We are dramatically shifting the evolutionary process, from a process of elimination of the most unfit species to survival of the few. Are we comfortable shaping the evolutionary process itself, having just held it up as one of the most fundamental of life’s processes? Knowledge is central to our emotional responses and the subsequent choices we make about how we should live on earth. Evolution may shape emotion, but what happens when the organisms shaped by evolution have insight into the process itself? How might the knowledge of our origins and interdependencies affect our responses to species extinctions, landscape degradation, and destabilizing climatic changes? Do we recognize ourselves, *Homo sapiens*, as the baby with the sharp knife? Furthermore, do we acknowledge our ability to grow?

Evolution has given us the capacity to be both destructive and responsible animals. Ethically right conduct is as “natural” to our species as ethically wrong conduct. We are not doomed to wrong conduct, nor are we doomed to ignorance about basic earthly realities about the origins of life and our place within it. It is now up to us to embrace this knowledge and put down the knife.

> “Scientists have failed to help us to face human ignorance with respect to the effects of large scale corporate, economic, and public policy initiatives. In the main, the scientific community has fed our economic and technological boosterism and left us bulls in the China shop of nature. Here evolutionary biologists and ecologists should particularly feel the moral sting. They have failed effectively to grab us citizens by the throat and forcibly make us understand and take to heart that human communities and their activities, economic and otherwise, are nestled within wider and vulnerable living systems.”

— Strachan Donnelley

*Scientists’ Public Responsibilities*

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