

LIFE SCIENCES AND THE TEACHING OF ETHICS. 1926

Old knowledge in new clothing

The modern science of life, i.e. **biology**, does not exclusively deal with botany and zoology. It is also related to anthropology. Such a relationship is of practical value in medicine: animal experiments, blood and serum research and much more has to be mentioned, with Steinach's transplants of gonads from primates into humans perhaps the topic of the day.

Modern psychology, based on experimental psychology, also does not deal exclusively with humans any more. It uses the same methods in animal research and we have a comparative anatomic-zootomic research resulting in instructive comparisons between the human and the animal soul*. Indeed, even the beginning of a psychology of plants is emerging – the best known representatives are G. Th. Fechner¹ in the past and R. H. Francé² and Ad. Wagner³ at present, – so that modern psychology includes all living beings in its research. Given these facts, it is only consequent when R. Eisler⁴ in conclusion talks about **Bio-Psychics** [Bio-Psychik].

From Biopsychics it is only one step to **Bio-Ethics** [Bio-Ethik], i.e. to the assumption of ethical responsibilities not only towards humans but towards all living beings. In fact,

* Particularly recommended among recent animal-psychological publications are Sommer, Tierpsychologie. Leipzig, and Alverdes, Tierpsychologie, Leipzig 1925.

¹ G. Th. Fechner, Nanna oder das Seelenleben der Pflanzen. Leipzig 1848

² R. H. Francé, Pflanzenpsychologie als Arbeitshypothese der Pflanzenphysiologie. Stuttgart 1909.

³ Ad. Wagner, Die Vernunft der Pflanze. Dresden 1926.

⁴ R. Eisler, Das Wirken der Seele. Stuttgart 1908.

bioethics is not quite a discovery of the present. Already the theologian Schleiermacher⁵ calls it unethical to destroy life and formation, as they are, without a reasonable purpose, i.e. also the animal and the plant. And even earlier the poet Herder⁶ requested humans to consider themselves to be in the place of other creatures in the image of the all-present feeling of the divine, to identify and to feel with each living being as much as they need it. Similarly, the philosopher Krause⁷, a contemporary of Schleiermacher, requests to honor every living being as such and not destroy it without purpose. He holds that they all, plants and animals and also humans, are equal in rights, but not identical in rights, each according to the necessary requirement to reach their destination.

As far as animals are concerned, such an ethical obligation has become self-evident for some time now, at least in the form of not making them suffer needlessly⁸. As an especially attractive role model from the past we may, particularly in this year, recall Francesco of Assisi and his great love for animals in our memories. – With plants it is different: it may be contrary to some people to consider certain ethical obligations towards plants. But this is not so. Already Paul in his poetic reference to the yearning hope⁹ of all creatures (i.e. also animals and plants) awakens our compassion with them. – A comparison piece would be in the third act of Richard Wagner's "Parsifal" with its moving atmospheric statements: In pious devotion, humans at least on Good Friday respect stalks

⁵ Schleiermacher, *Philosophische Sittenlehre* (Kirchmann) 1870.

⁶ Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*. Riga und Leipzig 1785.

⁷ K. Chr. Fr. Krause, *Das System der Rechtsphilosophie*. (Röder) Leipzig 1874.

⁸ The best publication in this area still is J. Bregenzer. *Tierethik*. Bamberg 1894.

⁹ Römerbrief Kap. 8;19-22. Recently J. Martius published „Die Unsterblichkeit der Pflanze“, Stuttgart 1838.

and flowers by walking carefully in the meadows in order not to hurt them. – In this context we also should mention the fairy tale by Anderson about the angel, who did not carry only the soul of the child, which prematurely died, into heaven but also a number of flowers, including a dried-out wild flower which had been his greatest and only pleasure when he was alive, a fatally ill child of poor parents in a dim basement. And God held all flowers close to his heart; but the poor dried-out wild flower he kissed, and she got voices and song from angels floating around God. – While these are only examples of poetic vision, it may be true what Richard Wagner had Hans Sachs say

“All creative writing and poetry
Are nothing but *true* interpretation of dreams
[*Wahrtraumdeuterei*]”.

We recognize this, when we familiarize ourselves with the serious plant-ethics concepts of a matter-of-fact philosopher, such as Ed. von Hartmann¹⁰, who died only twenty years ago. In an article on flower-luxury he writes about a cut flower: “She is an organism deadly hurt, but only her colors not yet destroyed, a head still there, but separated from the torso. – – Whenever I see a rose in a glass of water or tied into a bouquet, I cannot fight the unpleasant thought that a human being has murdered a flower life for the sole purpose to enjoy his/her eyes, heartless enough to not sense the unnatural death under the appearance of life. – – And if I see a masterpiece of a flower arrangement, a big basket overflowing with most precious wire-strung blossoms, I feel pressed to admire a la-

¹⁰ Psychological aspects are discussed by W. v. Schnehen. E. v. Hartmann und die Pflanzenpsychologie. Stuttgart 1908.

dies headdress of many pierced butterflies, broken on the wheel and still struggling”¹¹. The plant-ethics obligations associated with such a view are clear, of course.

The realization of such ethical obligations towards all living beings seems utopian. But we should not neglect that ethical obligations towards living beings in practicality are related to their “necessity” (Herder) or their “destination” (Krause). Now, the requirements of animals are much less complex in number and content than those of humans. This is even more true for the plant, so that ethical obligations towards plants – which already (if not in general, but in practice) are smaller than towards animals – are less difficult. Also, the principle of struggle for life is important, – a principle which in some way even modifies our ethical obligations towards humans. Within these parameters there remain always many opportunities for bioethical activity. An introduction on how this can be achieved in the fields of animal ethics is exemplified by various paragraphs of animal protection in the penal codes of different civilized countries¹². In the fields of plant ethics our compassion leads the way and hinders us from decapitating plants right and left with a walking stick when being on a stroll outside or from picking flowers and throwing them away without respect after a while; similarly we abhor the blind rage of destruction by unrefined lads breaking the stems of young trees along the road. – This results in the guiding principle for our actions in *the Bio-ethical Imperative*:

¹¹ Ed. von Hartmann. *Der Blumenluxus*. 1885.

¹² These materials are collected and discussed by R. v. Hippel. *Die Tierquälerei in der Strafgesetzgebung des In- und Auslandes*. Berlin 1891. For additional practical recommendations see Kyber: *Tierschutz und Kultur*, Stuttgart and Heilbronn 1925.

“Respect every living being in general as an end in itself and treat it, if possible, as such!”

As far as classroom teaching is concerned, it becomes possible to also influence the character [Gesinnung] in scientific disciplines educationally. Thus, these disciplines in some way become character formation disciplines as well. This is of great importance in regard to a timely request for environmental protection [Naturschutz]. We don't need to support environment protection only from an aesthetic point of view, rather from pointing out that it is horrible to torture animals, to senselessly destroy plants, and to deface God's free nature by thrown away paper, egg shells, or broken glass, – thus it will be elevated to a serious obligation in ethics.

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