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M-Word Blog

We need to discuss the M-Word! Don't misunderstand me. A discussion of the M-Word is important not because we are going to Hell if we ignore it. A discussion is important not because we are not going to survive the evolution struggle (less dramatically, will not get what we want) or because we are not going to experience "real" personal satisfaction if we ignore it. Simply stated, morality is important because we want to be human rather than mere animals or mechanical toys. It is at the pinnacle (actually, just below the pinnacle) of a set of astonishing, intangible (hence, immeasurable) and freely chosen (hence, ignorable) capacities that can make us human.

Where a discussion over the M-Word starts is not trivial. If it starts with fear, with strategies of evolutionary survival, with a discussion of the brain, with a set of fantasized Utilitarian scenarios of impossible "moral dilemmas" (like the obese person on the bridge over the tracks where a group is about to be killed by an on-rushing train if you don't push the obese person off the bridge before the train), with the obligation to preserve life, with the social construction of ethical norms, with blind (we'll discuss its blindness below) "basic facts," or with the ubiquitous, concealed possibilities of those "basic facts," or with the materialist assumption that *there can only be one kind of causality*, we will miss entirely what makes it possible for us to be moral beings because that which makes a discussion of morality *necessary* in the first place hasn't even shown up on the screen. The discussion that we need must start with a paradoxical capacity that makes it *necessary* for us to seek to be moral beings if we want to become human (more below).

What complicates our discussion is that we can only experience the effects of the capacities that make morality *necessary*. However, the effects are so abundant that we can deny this imperceptible capacity only at the expense of denying our self-understanding. Furthermore, regardless of all that is perceptible that one readily claims as one's inalienable, hence (morally) absolute rights (race, sex, gender, national origin, religious convictions, or political/economic ideology), they are all the tip of the iceberg of a hierarchy of intangible capacities that make one what one is (and can become). In other words, without denying its significance per se, this litany of elements that we cherish as central to our dignity and as constituting a set of natural rights that we take to be morally self-evident is merely supplemental to what makes these elements significant in the first place and to what makes morality *necessary*. One could say that this litany is merely the mere clothes worn by every(wo)man bound to the mast that we cling to when

confronted with the sirens of life's decisions. If we want to wrestle with morality and its significance for our daily lives (and not just something one attends to when one has time), we have to go deeper than the clothes, the physical strength of the ropes and mast, and deeper than even the physical backbone of the individual strapped to the mast.

We are a species with lousy, natural instincts. However, we have capacities that compensate for our natural limitations. As Jakob von Uexkull pointed out, we share with all sentient beings a stimulus – response structure. Ernst Cassirer emphasized, however, that we insert symbols into the midst of that stimulus – response structure where other species must depend upon their genes. These symbols not only allow us to grasp the “basic facts,” but they also allow us to deny our senses in order to appropriately grasp the “basic facts.” The sun is not moving, but there is no position we can take that would allow us to perceive the sun standing still as we're moving some 1,000 mph.

We use imperceptible concepts to classify and establish the perceptible facts. Without the concepts, there would be no determination of facts beyond the rudimentary, instinctual perceptions of other sentient beings. With concepts, we are literally able to “see things that aren't there” that are required for the kind of non-instinctual understanding that we possess. However, there are two perplexities with respect to these concepts: 1) they are not given with the data to which we apply them, and 2) we don't get them merely by closing our eyes and by looking inward into the mind. The popular explanation for explaining from where concepts come is that they are abstractions created by human beings (Nominalism). However, the assertion that they are abstractions created by humanity no more explains their origin than the opposite explanation that they come from an omniscient mind that exists independent of this universe (Platonic Rationalism). However, we are capable of creating abstractions only if there is an order already present in the data from which we are abstracting. The fact that we can come up with an omniscient mind only because we create an analogy that starts with our own minds is enough, David Hume reminds us, to shake our confidence that we have accounted for anything with the analogy other than elevate ourselves to serve as the key to the source of the absolute explanation of the universe. Our experience demonstrates that these concepts are not innate and that they must be acquired and applied by every individual for her-/himself. Acquisition of concept systems is at the core of all education, for without the concepts one cannot develop any skills whatsoever.

Acquisition of concepts reminds us of the power of our capacity in a further respect that is so obvious that we take it for granted. We don't simply acquire from others these concepts as already available. Originally, they were discovered (sometimes after a long chain of analogies) by someone, and each individual who understands them must make for oneself the discovery of the same concepts as well as new ones for processing sense data. That ability means two things when it comes to the broader category of symbols: 1) symbols are *not merely* “models of”

natural patterns (e.g., DNA) that shape the individual of a species, and 2) symbols are *not merely* already available, socially constructed (hence, culturally relative) “models for” as simply quasi-absolute, universal patterns (e.g., a food recipe, a mechanic’s manual, a surgical procedure) available for replication by an individual as Clifford Geertz and Paul Ricoeur maintain. Treating symbols as universals (even as merely quasi-universals for a particular culture) is an accurate description of how individuals and groups, in fact, do employ them, but it discounts and diminishes the significance of the reality that all concepts and symbols are the creative discovery of individuals, who in turn can apply them in new ways to make new discoveries and to create new artifacts. It is this deeper, originating characteristic of concepts and symbols that makes us *necessarily* moral beings.

In other words, not only are we capable of using concepts and symbols to understand phenomena in the world, but we are also capable of turning the trajectory around: we can initiate sequences of events that nature could never accomplish on its own. The effects of this capacity are apparent everywhere. No other species produces ice cream cones, no other species produces a political order based on the separation of powers, no other species creates music and the arts like we do. We have two options for accounting for these effects: 1) they are the product of blind, mechanical, physical causality; or 2) they are the product of a kind of causality possessed only by rational beings (i.e., beings capable of grasping the invisible, lawful order and structures of phenomena). The former reduces us to mere automatons or marionettes. The latter elevates us to the pinnacle of nature (be careful, though, this pinnacle comes at a price – see below).

In his latest work, *Die Macht der Moral im 21. Jahrhundert. Annäherungen an eine zeitgemäße Ethik (The Power of Morality in the 21st Century. : Converging on a Relevant Ethics)*, Otfried Höffe points out the errors in rejecting all forms of anthropocentrism. He proposes a *biocentric anthropocentrism* that recognizes that every species is *biocentric* given that life is a struggle for survival. Furthermore, he unequivocally rejects the crass form of anthropocentrism that maintains that humanity can do whatever it wishes with the environment and with other species. Nonetheless, he defends a biocentric anthropocentrism that recognizes the animal nature of humanity and its dependence upon fragile ecosystems, but he points to two extra-ordinary aspects of humanity: 1) our disinterested curiosity over all aspects of experience that is best served by acquiring awareness and sovereignty over the invisible, lawful order of nature (theoretical reason), and 2) our ability to use our understanding to initiate sequences of events that nature cannot do on its own (practical reason). The latter, too, is governed by an invisible, lawful order that is capable of being grasped and applied only by humanity: the moral order. In other words, Höffe demonstrates the relevance of Immanuel Kant’s claim in the *Critique of Judgment* (in the 18th Century) that humanity is the “goal of nature” because humanity has the capacity to be *a moral creature* (because of its practical reason), not (!) as *a creature of skills* (because of its theoretical reason that makes it possible for us to calculate, predict, manipulate, and control our environment and others). *Biocentric anthropocentrism*

means that we are at the center of the epistemological and technical universe only if we are at the center of the moral universe.

However, the moral universe is profoundly unlike the physical universe. The physical universe forces its laws upon us. If we are to understand and act successfully in the material world, we *have to* adhere to its laws. Nature amounts to a heteronomous system of laws that impose technical (skilled) and pragmatic (personal welfare) necessities upon us. Whether we want to build a house or pursue a particular career, our physical and cultural situation confronts us with laws and rules to which *we must conform*.

When it comes to practical reason, however, its laws cannot be imposed upon us by anything external or *over against* us because such a system of laws would contradict humanity's *autonomous* freedom, the very freedom to initiate a sequence of events that nature cannot accomplish on its own. As the etymology of the Greek (*autonomos*, to give oneself the law) says, these laws, then, can only be self-imposed, and no one but the self can know what the principle was that one used to give oneself permission to decide to do something.

There are two corollaries to the laws of autonomous freedom. First, only a rational species in possession of autonomous freedom can be moral. Second, if there are moral principles, it is the strongest indicator that there is autonomous freedom because those principles can only be self-legislated (but not created) by an agent in possession of autonomous freedom.

We will speak in a moment to the apparent circularity of this argument for autonomous freedom and moral principles. Before addressing the circularity, though, we have to acknowledge, along with Kant, that this capacity with its law is in a *precarious* position in an even more profound sense and in two respects. 1) Because autonomous freedom is *a form of causality* (an efficient causality that can initiate a necessary sequence of events that lead to a goal), it is impossible to prove or disprove it. Whether we're speaking of physical, efficient causality, autonomous freedom, or any other kind of causality, we are speaking on the basis of perceived *effects*, not direct access to causes. Causal *explanations* are something that we must *add to* the phenomena (in our case, to the effects that we seek to explain) in what are *a priori* synthetic judgments (without succumbing to Platonic Rationalism). This limitation does not mean that we create the cause that we're attempting to use to construct our explanation. It only means that we have to construct the explanation. 2) Because laws of all kinds are imperceptible, they, too, are incapable of proof or disproof because a proof/disproof requires empirical evidence. Again, as in the case of causality, we experience empirically the effects of laws, but we don't experience the laws directly in the senses. This limitation applies to laws of nature, to moral laws, as well as to any other laws (e.g., divine laws) that we might invoke to guide our decisions.

Why would we assume that there are only two domains, which complement one another, for which there are laws: nature and autonomous freedom? First, we must *assume* any *domain*, which by definition is a region of experience governed by laws, because we cannot prove/disprove them. Second, the legitimacy of the assumption has to do with causal systems. Where there is a causal system, there is order. A rational being is capable of understanding only if the domains in which it functions have an order. Our experience of dreams demonstrates to us what it would mean to have clarity and distinctness of perception without a causal order. Experience would be chaos. In fact, the opposite is the case because where we have a causal order there we appear to be able to ever-expand our grasp of the invisible lawful order as a coherent totality to more subtly and comprehensively understand phenomena.

The physical world can be understood only if it is governed by a lawful order of efficient causality that constitutes a coherent totality. This efficient causal order functions *blindly* because it does so without having to be consciously grasped by means of concepts to function. No one has to intellectually grasp the law of gravity for gravity to function. Nonetheless, although there is no way to prove or disprove that the laws of nature apply in all places and at all times (and now we understand not only because we can't ever get to all places and all times to look but also because of our limits for grasping causes), if we approach nature unlike any other species appears to be able to do (i.e., as if its events are governed by invisible laws), then we obtain an understanding and sovereignty over nature that is astonishing.

As a form of efficient causality, autonomous freedom *must* conform to an order. It is not a wild and merely spontaneous agency. This is not because we can prove or disprove that there are moral laws. It is because our experience of the capacity to initiate a sequence of events that nature cannot accomplish on its own is an experience of coherent activity that can be repeated and predicted. The only thing striking about this system of law is that it must be self-legislated, and, as a consequence, it can be ignored – unlike the heteronomous lawful system of nature. However, we approach nature as if it were lawful not because we can prove or disprove its lawfulness. Similarly, we approach our autonomous freedom as if it were lawful, not because we can prove or disprove its lawfulness. Were we to deny the lawfulness of nature, we would get into trouble quickly. Were we to deny the lawfulness of autonomous freedom, we would turn our animality into something even baser than animality. At least the actions of animals are governed by (instinctual) laws of nature. Without moral laws, our spontaneity would be an incalculable, destructive capriciousness in an otherwise lawful environment.

Before turning to describing our precarious, moral condition, we need to address at least briefly the possibility of divine causality and its laws? There is no way to prove or disprove such a causality and system of laws any more than one can prove or disprove any other kind of causality and its system of law. God or the gods would be causal agents so that, if they existed, either they would have to conform to a system of laws or they would merely introduce

uncertainty, if not chaos, into what we otherwise experience as an ordered reality. However, one of the reasons that God or the gods are attractive for our explanations of events is that they give us a causal agency that can ignore or break the laws of causal systems *for a greater purpose*, and, ultimately, that greater purpose serves our personal interest. Here we have touched on two reasons for us to be seriously skeptical when it comes to our attempts to explain events by means of divine causality: 1) the explanation undermines our confidence in our ability to understand nature; and 2) the explanation is driven by self-interest rather than our significance in the orders of things consisting in our seeking the highest that can be achieved under natural conditions, that is, moral achievement because it is right, not because it serves personal interest. Of course, the most devastating consequence for our own efforts at moral improvement by deferring to God and the gods is that the introduction of the causal agency of God or the gods transforms our focus on our own creative energies and excitement into fear of the consequences of our moral failures or our inescapable moral turpitude encouraging us to fold our hands to wait for God or the gods to accomplish miraculously what we otherwise can only accomplish ourselves by insight into the causal orders that we know are *necessary* to our experience (and not merely *desirable* in experience): nature and autonomous freedom.

Rather than our causality of autonomous freedom constituting a disruptive exception to the causal orders that we must *necessarily* assume if we are to make sense of the appearances that are our world/universe, autonomous freedom can only function if it is complementary to the causal order of nature. That complementarity is the strongest empirical evidence (short of empirical evidence for autonomous freedom and natural causality themselves, which we can never have) contradicting the notion that the reality of two forms of efficient causality would result in shattering the unity and coherence of reality. Given that the understanding of causality is an achievement of autonomous freedom in the supersensible realm of intelligibility, we would be shooting ourselves in the head to insist that either our efficient causality of autonomous freedom is an illusion or we can hold onto autonomous freedom until we have a materialistic account of freedom in conformity with the natural laws of “basic facts” (John Searle). We don’t need to invoke a “freedom of the gaps” to hold onto our self- and world-understanding. We only need to acknowledge the *necessity* of *a priori* synthetic judgment to any and all understanding.

It must be immediately conceded that, given our privileging of sense data, which encourages us to seek in its objectivity any and all understanding of ourselves in the order of things, the suggestion that the imperceptible elements and structures of ourselves should really be the privileged dimension for any and all understanding is counter intuitive. In light of those limitations that each of us acknowledges in our heart of hearts – even when those around us applaud us for our achievements – and in light of the even more radical limitations of our dependence upon presuppositions in any and all understanding, we must also candidly acknowledge that our species is in a very precarious position. Nevertheless, this precarious position appears to be the highest that nature is capable of achieving, and we fail not only

ourselves but also nature when we deny our capacities to be the only moral species on this planet. Dare we say, we are a traitor to our own species when we refuse citizenship in the invisible kingdom of ends that is the key to dignity and the strongest motivator to exercise our creative talents regardless of our physical and mental limitations.

Nietzsche dismisses Kant as an unrealistic optimist whose description of humanity's place in the orders of things depends naively upon human beings individually doing the right thing because it is right and not because it serves one's self interest. Granted there is a profound theme of hope in Kant's project – not least a hope that we in fact do possess autonomous freedom and a hope that the consequences of our moral efforts will turn out to be what we want them to be even though we have no ultimate control over them. However, this is no Pollyannaish belief in the “good” character of humanity. Kant's hope acknowledges that radical evil will always *necessarily* remain a live option if we are autonomously free. Despite all vigilance against evil, then, there is no guarantee that humanity is on some trajectory of moral progress. What anchors hope is that our autonomous freedom is ineradicable as long as we exist. As a consequence, it is present in the most devastating moments of our personal lives and of human history, and it provides the ground for ever renewed effort that the invisible kingdom of ends is more sovereign than the visible kingdom of interests.