

**Committee I**  
**The Evolution of Man**

**For Conference Distribution Only**

**DISCUSSION PAPER**

on

**Session VI.**

**TRADITIONAL ETHICS, ETHICAL DECISION THEORY  
AND EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS**

by

**Discussant**  
**Waldemar Molinski**  
*Professor of Ethics*  
*University of Wuppertal*  
*Wuppertal, WEST GERMANY*

**The Seventeenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences**  
**Los Angeles, California      November 24-27, 1988**

© 1988, International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences

Waldemar Molinski

COMMENTARY TO W.LEINFELLNER, TRADITIONAL ETHICS, ETHICAL DECISION  

---

THEORY AND EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS

For a traditional ethicist the paper of Prof. Leinfellner is fascinating and irritating at the same time. In a very precise and clear way Leinfellner develops his opinion about the origin of human knowledge and especially of human ethics. In a context where the theory of evolution becomes more and more the universally accepted paradigm for the explication of the evolution of man it becomes a necessity to explain empirically how human intelligence, how human knowledge and activity have to be understood.

I cannot decide if the explanation of Leinfellner is correct or not. Neither can I realize if Leinfellner is giving us a working hypothesis for explaining the evolution of ethics or a theory how this evolution must be explained. In my opinion his statements sound reasonable, although I can't follow the way he proceeds from his description and analysis of the evolution of ethics to normative postulates of ethics. Besides it is difficult for me to understand the exact meaning of his analysis, because he uses concepts, especially the concept of ethics, in a way which is different from the customary use of them in traditional ethics.

As far as I see is the evolution of ethics the progressing process of liberating man from external determinations and the

process of an increase of his control of his nature and of nature in general. This process leads to a distinguished and unique position of man within the framework of nature. This means that the evolution is a permanent process of creating more and more perfect beings by selftranscending of less perfect beings to more perfect ones which therefore become more and more able to determine themselves.

The motor of this process in the realm of animals is a progressing adaption of clusters of genes to all environmental influences relevant for survival and procreation under growing differentiated conditions and the selection of those genes, which are unable - in competition with others - to survive. The instruments of this adaption and selection are the determination and indeterminism of the material matter, its necessity and random. During this process of evolution the gene-clusters, which at a certain time will develop to human beings, become more and more capable of dominating the laws of material matter to which they are submitted. Step by step they learn to apply the laws of material matter in the interest of their own survival and propagation and in that one of their species. In the process of humanization the capacity of mere reaction is substituted by the capacity of gambling. This one is substituted by the capacity of making purposeful decisions. And this again proceeds from decisions programmed by ordinary genes to decisions programmed by regulating genes. In the course of evolution these decisions were

supplemented with decisions preprogrammed by our peripheral sensory filters which influenced by an interneuronal coding process, the functions of our limbic system and our neocortex. The latter preprogrammed the semantic functions of our language and finally the preference for certain customs and the best solutions concerning our survival and the development of the individual and the society.

They again preprogramme the build-up of cultural norms, rites etc. which become treasured up in the memory of individuals and in the artifacts of human institutions. And these ones finally preprogramme the decisions we have to make today for the purpose of adapting us to the changing biological and cultural evolution; this is necessary for our own survival in coexistence, cooperation and coparticipation with our fellow-men.

In correspondance with this explanation of the evolution of ethics many traditional and Christian ethicists are convinced that the man with his reason is the product of a selftranscending evolution which makes the man able to become his own master and to resolve his problems of conservation and evolution in a rational manner. In a Christian perspective this evolution appears as the result of a finalistic process of continuous creation by God. God created the world with the capacity that it becomes more and more perfect and that finally it produces human beings and even the Son of God. Teilhard de Chardin and Karl Rahner are typical represen-

tatives of this vision of the creation.

The human nature which with its reasonability is the product of selftranscended physics and biology demands that moral judgments are based

- on the natural human inclinations which are the result of the evolution
- on the experience with the effects of the human activity which steers the impulses of the human inclinations vis a vis the external reality and
- On the reasonable reflection how the human activity should be directed that it serves the goals of normative ethics.

That means that the normative ethics is a creation of the activity of reason. Which activity is reasonable must be determined in an hermeneutic interpretation of the aposterioric experience in the light of the aprioristic determinations of the reason.

The theory that ethics is a product of evolution and the theory how ethics works are not ethical theories but metaethical theories. It is impossible from these theories to deduce directly a certain normative ethics which determinates exactly what we ought to do. Metaethics explains the non-ethical preconditions of normative ethics, the aprioristic conditions of the possibility of a normative ethics. But it does not claim to be itself a normative ethical theory. It does not explain what in reality is morally

right or wrong. Explaining the evolution of ethics Leinfellner develops a metaethical theory of ethics. In a logical and analytical manner from this theory he can not deduce directly a normative ethics. For there is no direct way from <sup>is</sup> be to ought. That is the most fundamental insight of analytical ethics. As an experience oriented metaethicist he can only say hypothetically: if we want that the individual acts in the interest of the survival of our species the respective person should act in a manner which according to our experience serves the best the survival of our species. Furthermore he can describe in which manner according to our experience we should act if we want that our species survives the best. Doing that he is using a certain kind of scientific methodology in the interest to find a normative rule for a certain kind of human behavior in accordance with the fundamental ethical principle and with a certain final ethical goal.

He determinates moral rules evaluating scientifically reflected experiences in reference to an aprioristic ethical principle and goal. This is for him the golden rule which for him is the aprioristic criterium for the determination of ethically right judgements. But he can not explain in an aposterioristic manner why the golden rule must be the aprioristic criterium for the formulation of ethical judgements. With his method he can not explain that and why an individual or we all should want that our species survives the best. He can not explain why somebody or a group of men act immorally if he or the group do not aim the best survival

he cannot explain  
of themselves or the species. By principle/how somebody can act  
immorally.

The analytical ethics shows very well that a direct foundation of a normative ethics is possible only under the condition that we presuppose an aprioristic ethical principle, namely that always we should make the better choice, and that we determinate that what we consider as our final ethical goal. The reason for this determination can be either an intuition or a decision. That somebody prefers the one or the other final ethical goal is not a direct consequence of his empirical knowledge. But it is the consequence of his transcendently founded interpretation of his empirical knowledge. The brain related reason determinates which activity must be judged as morally right. The hermeneutical approach to this judgement leads to the conclusion that the intuitionistic or the decisionistic foundation of normative ethics appears to be more plausible than the other and for that reason as preferable.

However the brain may be related to the reason it is not directly the brain but the reason which with the help of its hermeneutical principles determinates that what is morally right or wrong. The genesis of an ethical judgement may be explained as the result of a complex relationship between brain and reason. But the validity of ethical judgements depends directly of the practical reason and of the theoretical-practical reason. What we ought to

do we learn only indirectly from the evolution of our knowledge and from our practical experience.

The problem with the ethical approach of Leinfellner is for me neither his metaethical explanation of the evolution of ethics nor the content of his postulates of normative ethics. But I have difficulties how he founds his normative postulates. I can't see how his evolutionary epistemology shattered the paradigm of "apriorism" of ethics in general and of his normative ethics in special.

I have the impression that Leinfellner founds his normative ethics on the intuition that the golden rule is morally right. I agree to him that we ought to act in conformity with the golden rule. This insight Leinfellner gets from an hermeneutical interpretation of the human inclinations and of the effects of the human activity in the interest of the conservation and of the development of the human species. For me that is a procedure which is very effective in the interest of the consideration and of the development of the human species. From my point of view it is a very ethical proceeding. So I learn a lot of its results. Furthermore I learn a lot of his scientific method to analyze the consequences of our activities for our relations to others.