

Deep And Global Bioethics For A Livable Third Millennium

By Van Rensselaer Potter (& Peter James Whitehouse) | *The Scientist*, January 5, 1998

In three short years it will be Jan. 1, 2001, the first day of the 21st century and a new era. The United States will be expecting the inaugural message of a new president and the world will enter the Third Millennium. As the Second Millennium ends, we ought to think about what kind of a world we should and could realistically hope for. We certainly need a world with fewer than the often-predicted 12 billion people who may be present before the end of the 21st century. Unfortunately, in our mad scramble to maintain the capitalistic civilization that attempts to accelerate excess consumption throughout the world, we give little thought to who sits at the table and who goes hungry. On the "Bridge to the 21st Century" we may preempt our chances of arriving at the 25th century or the year 3000. Will we exit from the third millennium with health, peace, a stable ecosystem, and social justice? Will we have a stabilized world population ready to enter the Fourth Millennium with fewer than the nearly 6 billion people now on Earth?



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Cultural evolution has failed to reflect on the lessons of biological evolution and to develop a civilization that can delay its own extinction. The course of cultural evolution must be radically changed. Deep and global bioethics that is a well-researched, comprehensive, and worldwide morality must evolve in the first few decades of the 21st century. After that it may be too late.

Deep Bioethics is about wisdom and realism—not optimism, not pessimism, but realism, the reality perceived objectively. Full objectivity may be an unattainable goal, but realism rich with honesty and sincerity and empowered by the challenge of complexity is not. We seek the deeper necessity, not the shallow need conceived by corporate money managers for short-term profit or that of politicians raising money for the next election. Deep Bioethics is neither conservatism nor liberalism but instead, realism—realism about the nature of the human animal and realism about the nature of the world we live in and are dependent on. Deep Bioethics is a search for wisdom defined as judgment as to how to use knowledge for social good. We call for bioethical wisdom that will combine ecological knowledge with a sense of moral responsibility for a livable world.

Indeed, this moral responsibility falls on all levels of human society: individuals, universities, corporations, government, and nongovernmental organizations, including religion. Motivated individuals who feel a moral responsibility for a livable world could choose to join and support one or more of the many reform groups that are demanding

radical change now. These movements are calling for the change in the culture that must occur early in the 21st century not as a matter of moral responsibility for what we ought to do, but purely as a matter of what we must do to survive. We can here mention only three of the many: the Washington D.C.-based Worldwatch Institute; the Cambridge, Mass.-based Union of Concerned Scientists; and The Natural Step, based in Sausalito, Calif.

Deep Bioethics began with the intuition that it is right, good, ethical, desirable, and possible to have a livable and sustainable lifestyle that could persist in a form acceptable to a democratic, widely diverse world population until the year 3000 and beyond. The lifestyles of the world population can remain diverse and still be compatible with a stable biosphere.

So it boils down to what we must do according to the intuition of Deep Bioethics. What we must do for the health and survival of the next several generations in a recovering biosphere is what we ought to do for the generations in the far future. That is what Deep Bioethics is all about. In a recent fax from an equally motivated molecular evolutionist-Richard Grantham, a professor, emeritus, at the Université Claude Bernard in Lyon, France-he commented (in French and English): "L'éthique est plus que raison: Sa tâche est de choisir le monde futur." ("Ethics is more than reason: Its task is to choose the future world"). And his friend Tim Greenland added in a separate fax, "If those who could, did, those who ought, might," implying that if those who could did what must be done, those who ought might do what should be done.

From the time the word was coined in 1970, bioethics-choosing the future world-has evolved into many approaches to what we must do, from clinical ethics to sustainable agriculture to Deep Bioethics. Our present addition of the word "deep," embracing and extending Global Bioethics, was inspired by the phrase "Deep Ecology," first used by Arne Naess, a professor, emeritus, of philosophy at the University of Oslo, Norway. At a Third World Futures conference held in Bucharest in 1972, he defined Deep Ecology by what it was not: Obviously the opposite of deep is shallow, both literally and figuratively.

Naess pointed out that two environmental movements had arisen during the 1960s: a "shallow," human-centered, technocratic environmental movement concerned primarily with pollution, resource depletion, and the "health and affluence of people in the developed countries" in contrast to an ecocentric "Deep, Long-Range Ecology movement." In disdaining anthropocentrism and shallow ("reform") ecology, Naess's views were called misanthropic by a few people who had their own political agendas. Deep Ecology was taken up in America, particularly by Bill Devall of the department of sociology at Humboldt State University in Arcata, Calif., and by George Sessions, chairman of the philosophy department at Sierra College in Rocklin, Calif.

The necessity and power of a worldwide, biologically all-encompassing global ethic are metaphorically extended by searching to the core of our world and ourselves for the human values and ecological connections that motivate us to work together for a shared future. The concept "deep" was made explicit in the term "Deep Bioethics," but the intent was implicit in the word "bioethics" from its very beginning, when "bioethics" called for the integration of science and human values to ensure a bridge to the future. The search for wisdom has persisted, examining ways to promote human health, human survival, human justice, and the knowledge that will instruct the human species as to its proper place and its moral responsibility toward every living thing if there is, indeed, to be a "bridge to the future." We do not now possess all the ecological and behavioral knowledge that will be needed. Deep Bioethics implies an ethics that is based on careful study and research.

Aldo Leopold, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, worried about these things, finally formulating an "ecological conscience" that evolved into publication of *A Sand County Almanac* (New York, Oxford University Press) containing his "Land Ethic" in 1947. He began the search for wisdom that Deep Bioethics aspires to carry on. He issued a flood of aphorisms, but what might be considered the opening salvo said it well: "A land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member

and citizen of it." To this he added, "An ethic to supplement and guide the economic relationship to land presupposes the existence of some mental image of land as a biotic mechanism."

The word "bioethics" incorporated "ethics" and "bio" after Aldo Leopold's introduction of the concept of "land ethic." In the Deep Ecology movement, the word "shallow" is frequently followed by "reform" in parentheses. Deep Bioethics does not regard reform or activist movements as shallow. Indeed, a livable and sustainable lifestyle that could persist in a form acceptable to a democratic, widely diverse world population to the year 3000 and beyond with human health and human justice is a revolutionary idea. The lifestyle that would be required calls for all the ecological knowledge and morality that can be developed to tell people not only what they must do to survive, but also what they ought to do for future generations.

The proposal that the world population is already too large has been labeled "misanthropic," but reproductive freedom and access to education for women plus active programs for reducing the rate of increase of world population must remain key proposals in Deep Bioethics.

Second, sustainable agriculture, sustainable forestry, and sustainable world fishing must be coupled with protection and restoration of the natural environment. These arrangements should be incorporated into international agreements with enforceable sanctions.

Third, ways must be found to curb the capitalist drive to exploit the free market system with globalization of economic forces that lack global responsibility. It is a misuse of arguments for increased wages in the Third World when, instead of motivation for social justice and global morality, the increases are seen as a way to escalate the purchase of automobiles and other technological consumer products. The present level of consumerism in large segments of Western society has been seen as immoral by both Aldo Leopold and Arne Naess. The promotion of needless consumerism on a global level is equally condemned by Deep Bioethics in principle.

Finally, medical bioethics should expand beyond the narrow focus of the present clinical ethics that deals largely with individual patient/physician decisions in a corporate setting. Medical bioethics has been renamed biomedical ethics by some, but the effort has remained essentially a matter of ethicists dealing with clinical dilemmas. This effort bypasses the bioethics that was broadly defined in 1971 to include the dilemmas of dangerous knowledge in both environmental and medical activities. At that time it was suggested that the answer to dangerous knowledge was more knowledge. Today it is clear that the answer to dangerous knowledge in both areas of activity is ethical judgment constrained by biological knowledge.

Deep Bioethics applies to medical science in several problem areas. For example, at either the institutional or the community level, individual autonomy needs to be guided and constrained by realistic appraisal of available information and community need.

Deep Bioethics may aid in the expansion of the medical bioethics perspective to a global bioethic that will combine the goal of world health with decreased reproductive rates and ecological morality. Diverse lifestyles that are compatible with a stable biosphere can also contribute to human health.

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