

GLOBAL SYSTEMS OF ETHICS FOR A SUSTAINABLE CIVILISATION¹

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Abstract

This is a study of ethics from a systemic point of view. It starts by stating the foundation of ethics in God and postulating that the essence of ethics is love and self-denial. The study then turns to examine the relationship between ethics, faith, justice and sentiment. This is followed by the operational aspect of love and its expressions in a variety of social systems including marriage. Marriage is described as providing the cardinal portrait of ethics that should be reproduced in every other human system. The role of ethics in ensuring that a society remains viable or sustainable is discussed next and this leads to a delineation of the role of ethics in economics and management. The study ends with a discussion of ethics and globalisation. It criticises the effort to force globalisation on humanity and warns that global systems are inherently unstable and proposes an alternative form of transmitting ethics based on Stafford Beer's definition of recursive systems.

Keywords: ethics, love, God, modality, viability

1. Introduction

As I have struggled in the last ten years to direct my work in systems science towards the issues that really matter in life, I have found it progressively harder to do science without reference to God. Without God, science seems to vanish down an alley of trivialities leaving us empty and helpless. This is even more intensely so when one grapples with something like ethics, at least an ethics worth living. Chesterton seems to have felt the same when he wrote:

Morality did not begin by one man saying to another, "I will not hit you if you do not hit me"; there is no trace of such a transaction. There *is*² a trace of both men having said, "we must not hit each other in the holy place." They gained their morality by guarding their religion. (Chesterton, 1994, p. 70.)

Ethics has entered human civilisation and my life through the experience of God. That is, people gain their knowledge of ethics by receiving it either directly from God or ultimately from other another person who has received it from God. God has planted ethics in mankind. Thus, my effort has been directed "...to create a science that deserves a God" (Churchman, 1968, p. 126) and named this endeavour multi-modal systems thinking (de Raadt, 1989, 1996, 1997a and b, 1998). This type of thinking is based on four tenets. The first is that understanding is not gained from the study of impersonal, inert and static laws (such as Plato's *eidos*) but from our encounter with a personal, living and dynamic God who commands the universe. Secondly, our humanity is rooted in this personal, living and dynamic character of God. It can be said - without subtracting from his transcendence -that only God is truly human, ours is only a reflection of his humanity. If we believe this, then an incarnation of God in man should not surprise us³. Thirdly, life rather than mere existence ought to be the first aim of our search for understanding. Fourthly, our life has become a tragedy through our vanity. We all die, for the crimes against humanity have been committed by humanity either through

¹ Plenary address delivered at the 42nd Annual Meeting of the International Society for the Systems Sciences, Georgia Institute of Technology, July 1998, Atlanta.

² Italics are his.

³ Therefore, it is through his humanity rather than through his transcendence that we come close to God.

commission or omission. We die in every form: we die as much ethically as aesthetically, socially, biologically and physically. And the universe dies with us.

The four tenets leave us with what Unamuno has called a “tragic sense of life” (1986) and it has been my conviction that wisdom and the sciences should first concern themselves with this sense. They should seek to understand God’s command as he leads us out of the tragedy. God’s command is multi-modal as is evidenced by the varieties of sciences that have emerged in the history of human thought. I have dealt with seventeen such modalities⁴: credal, ethical, juridical, aesthetic, economic, operational social, epistemic, informatory, historical, psychic, biotic, physical, kinetic, spatial, numeric and logical. These modalities not only represent the variety of dimensions found in God’s command, but also the multi-faceted character of life. Furthermore, God’s command of the universe is not only multi-modal, but also universal and vocational (see Figure 1). The universal command is addressed to the universe in general (shaded area), the vocational command, to man’s heart in particular (blank area). By heart, I do not just mean

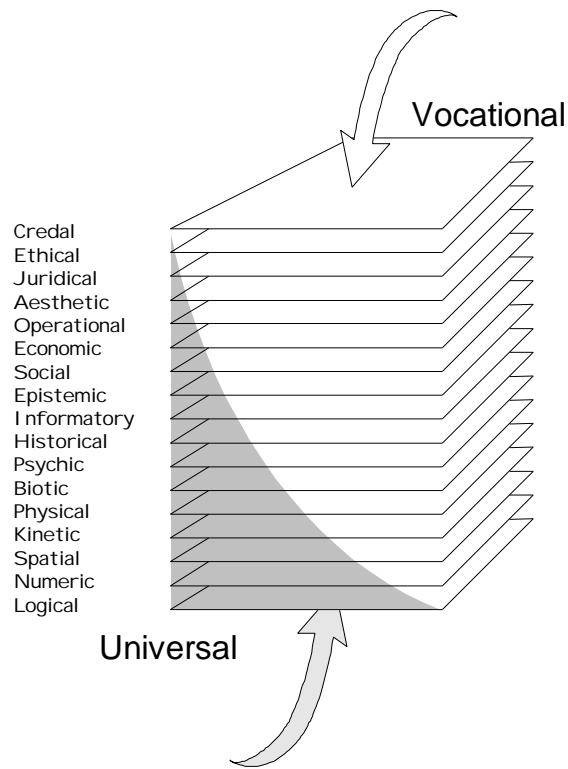


Figure 1: Modalities

emotions, but the inner totality of our person that exercises will. We are not responsible for the things that happen to us as part of God’s universal command, but we are responsible for the actions we will. The universal command represents what we are as humans and what we cannot change. The vocational command represents the type of life that God wishes us to live; it represents the kind of men and women we ought to be. Though the modalities are diversity, they also are unity held together by the universal and vocational command as is illustrated by the two arrows in Figure 2. The universal command moves upwards making each modality the foundation or raw material of the next one above. In this manner, each modality emerges out of the prior one with new properties but at the same time having lost some of the properties of the lower modality. For example, the informatory modality provides the epistemic modality with the necessary information for knowledge. Knowledge is richer than information but it lacks the close symbolic representation that characterises information. The vocational command on the other hand, moves downwards. It makes each modality the inspiration or mission of the lower one. For example: we seek information (informatory) in order to understand (epistemic). If we arrange the modalities according to the upward foundation and downward inspiration, then their order will be something like the one shown in Figure 2. Moreover, the universal command’s presence will be stronger in the lower modalities and weaker in the higher ones as illustrated by the shaded area. The degree of strength of the vocational command will be the reverse. Finally, the highest modality is the credal - the realm of faith - and the lowest is the logical. While the logical modality provides the most basic raw material, that is, all other modalities emerge out of it⁵, the credal modality provides the ultimate inspiration for everything. Ultimately, we live by faith in God. That is, life must be anchored outside rather than inside of us.

2. Ethics

Influenced by the impersonality of our philosophy and science, ethics is often regarded as a code of behaviour. While this type of ethics may lend itself to postulation and even logical analysis and

⁴ Although Dooyeweerd (1958), a major contributor to modal theory, has identified fifteen modalities.

⁵ This may have led the Greek philosophers to deduce that the universe was governed by pure logic.

justification, it has very little to offer. Such ethics cannot shape our lives and we cannot teach it to our children. For one cannot cast a personal and dynamic life on an impersonal mould. One can only live by an ethics that has a personal and committed love as its essence and is not a mere list of rules. Love is not a constraint, but is a driving and positive force that leads us to do more rather than less. It is a way of life that marks the character of a person and leads him to care as much for his neighbour as he cares for himself. This is very well pictured in the following passage written by St Paul:

Love is patient, love is kind.
 It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.
 It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily
 angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.
 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the
 truth.
 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes,
 always perseveres.
 Love never fails.

I Corinthians 13: 4 - 8.

However, since man has violated all justice due to vanity, love must also entail sacrifice. Sacrifice means paying for the shortcomings – including the injustice - of our neighbour. Therefore, God paid for the shortcomings of humanity by becoming incarnate in a perfectly just man and suffering the treatment Glaucon had anticipated:

...the just man, as we have pictured him, will be scourged, tortured, and imprisoned,
 his eyes will be put out, and after enduring every humiliation he will be crucified...
 (Plato, 1980, p. 108.)

This sacrificial fulfilment of justice by God must be appropriated by us and made central to our love and ethics. Since there is always someone who draws more than his just share in this world or maliciously causes damage to others, others must compensate with love for society to remain viable. Ethics is, therefore, the art of self-denial whereby we devote our life and work to serve and make up for the shortcomings of our fellow man hoping that someone will make up for our own shortcomings. This is precisely the opposite of the utilitarian ethics that rules our market economies today. Greed does not care for the poor and destitute left outside of the margin of industrialised wealth. Only self-denial and taking up our cross does.

3. Foundations and Inspiration of Ethics

There are several connections – both universal and vocational - that exist between the ethical modality and the others. They are of particular interest to systems science for these connections make the various social and natural systems cling together. Love ought to inspire our operation in every modality such as in the arts (aesthetic), in learning (epistemic) and (social) interaction. Love brings its share of sacrifice and suffering, for suffering will be the companion of love in every modality of life. Even our intelligence and understanding cannot be developed without suffering⁶. Figure 2 shows the ethical modality as a foundation and inspiration to three other modalities: credal, juridical and psychic. Creed inspires love in two ways (see Figure 2a). Firstly, one can only believe in love. Without faith, loving our neighbour, let alone sacrificing our self-interest for his sake, is sheer madness. Secondly, the personal quality of love that St Paul so vividly describes, reflects our experience, again through faith, of the character of God. St Paul taught us the love he saw in Christ whom he believed to be God. Love on the other hand provides the foundation for genuine faith. We may use love as the test of the sincerity of what people believe. God is love. We should be on our guard when people claim to have received direction from God to act in a way that does not show his love. The extreme example of this are holy wars, forcefully imposed moral purges, murder and other acts of so called martyrdom including suicide. It is a paradox that in industrialised societies that

⁶ A cybernetic homomorphism of this relationship between suffering and learning is expounded in de Raadt (1991) pp. 60f.

regard themselves as advanced and secular one should find so many cruel religions and such credulity among the people. Perhaps it is an indication that in industrialised societies people do not know much about love to be able to test their religion.

It is common for people to confuse ethics with justice. Many who write about professional ethics, for example, mean justice rather than sacrificial ethics. An action is just if a person has an obligation to

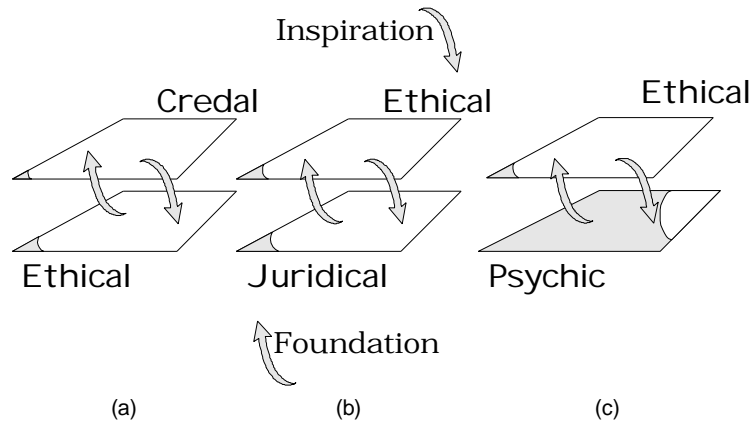


Figure 2: Ethics

act towards another person who has a right. It is a matter of justice that I produce a full day’s work for my employer’s full day’s pay. It is a matter of sacrificial ethics that I decide to do some extra work after closing time to help him without expecting any compensation. Nevertheless, justice cannot exist without ethics. Ethics is necessary to inspire justice (see Figure 3b): justice must be tempered with mercy (love). A justice that is not inspired by ethics will eventually become oppressive and an instrument of repression that will destroy people and society. A judge who severely exercises justice without love will not dispense true justice. Moreover those who thirst for justice without love, turn it into vengeance and this often leads to their own destruction as well as those whom they seek to avenge. On other hand, love without the foundation of justice is like mothers who pick up the dirty socks of their sons without disciplining them. This kind of indulging love is not real love, for it is detrimental to youth. It omits teaching them their duty towards others, especially those who love them and provide for them. Likewise, the increasingly popular practice of men and women entering a de facto relationship without a civil marriage ignores that true love recognises the just obligation of the spouses to each other. The dissolution of marriage often leads to great injustices to the more vulnerable members of a family, especially the children, and without justice and a civil commitment of the spouses there is no way to protect their rights.

It is also common for people to confuse committed love in the ethical modality with falling in love in the psychic modality. There is of course an important relationship between love and falling in love: the psychic modality provides the raw material in the sensual affection through which ethical love can be expressed (see Figure 2c). We can thus feel the ethical love that another person has for us. However, this sensual affection should not be confused with ethical love. Romantically falling in love with someone is not the same as developing a committed love for that person. One may fall out of love as quickly as one has fallen into it, but the commitment of ethical love remains regardless of what our feelings may be at any particular time. Unfortunately, we do not have in the English language appropriate words to differentiate between these two types of loves. In Greek, two words are available: *agape* and *eros*. Psychic *eros* can be angered and the beloved may be bitterly reproached; sometimes the stronger *eros* is, the bitterer the reproach will be. Some of the most vicious remarks are uttered in a lovers' quarrel. Yet, *agape* holds the two lovers together and prevents them turning a lovers' quarrel into an enemy's quarrel. This long lasting quality of *agape* is not only present in romance. Most work requires similar love and devotion. Scholars, artists and others at times reach a point of saturation and exhaustion in their work, and experience anger akin to a lover's quarrel. *Agape* for their work keeps them going despite the temporary revulsion that they may feel towards it.

4. Ethics in Systems

The channel that communicates ethical love to all kinds of systems is the social modality that governs the different roles and the structure of groups in humanity. Ethical love defines two social roles in man and woman. The masculine role is paternal and centres on leadership and the feminine role is maternal and centres on sustenance. These roles are not arbitrary, they reflect the character of God who both leads and sustains and who has created man and woman in his image and has delegated his leadership to man and his sustenance to woman. These means that the complete image of humanity is neither present in individual man or woman but in the complement of both. Leadership reflects itself in the multi-modal strength of man and sustenance in the multi-modal tenderness of woman. It is this strength and tenderness that respectively form the essence of masculinity and femininity. Of these two roles, leadership confronts the greatest danger, for leadership includes protection and this may cost the leader's life. Therefore, a leader's job demands the greatest ethical love. As Lewis puts it:

Christian writers (notably Milton) have sometimes spoken of the husband's headship with a complacency to make the blood ran cold. We must go back to our Bibles. The husband is the head of the wife just in so far as he is to her what Christ is to the Church. He is to love her as Christ loved the Church - read on - and *give his life for her* (*Eph. V, 25*). This headship, then, is most fully embodied not in the husband we should all wish to be but in him whose marriage is most like a crucifixion; whose wife receives most and gives least, is most unworthy of him, is - in her own mere nature - least lovable... The chrism of this terrible coronation is to be seen not in the joys of any man's marriage but in its sorrows, in the sickness and sufferings of a good wife or the faults of a bad one, in his unwearying (never paraded) care or his inexhaustible forgiveness: forgiveness, not acquiescence. (1988, pp. 105f.)

While Lewis speaks specifically of conjugal relationships, there is a wider principle in his statement. It should lead men to treat all "...older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity..." and with the same sacrificial love⁷. Yet, vanity turns the very strength that allows a man to lead and protect womanly tenderness into a weapon for abuse. Here lies the core of the conflict between men and women. Woman's tenderness requires protection and leadership to fulfil its sustaining role. This very mark of woman's femininity makes her vulnerable to the abuse of him who should be her leader and protector and who should be prepared to lay down his life for her. Feminism has risen as a response to this abuse. It has sought to constrain it by attempting to redistribute power in society, by removing the exclusive exercise of leadership and other traditional roles from men and assigning them equally to men and women. But, the benefits that this redistribution of roles has accrued on women are questionable (Bloom, 1997; Held, 1997; Lewis, 1994, Tar, 1985), often they have left women in a more vulnerable situation. For removing man from leadership does not necessarily decrease his abuse of woman, but on the contrary, relieved from the responsibility of protecting her, he is likely to exercise more freely his advantages against her. Furthermore, equality of roles and women's participation in leadership roles has forced women to abandon their tenderness and become like men. This betrays a view that femininity is inferior to masculinity rather than recognising the equal human worth of the feminine talents. The discarding of feminine titles that differentiate between men and women such as manageress, actress and waitress and their replacement with manager, waiter and actor⁸ give the impression that there is something demeaning in the calling a woman woman. This is exacerbated by the tragicomic picture of women dressed like men in army fatigues, in executive business suites or priestly garb. Womanhood is demeaned even more so by some extreme cases of post-modern feminism that recommend the bordello queen style of rock star Madonna as a role model for the empowered woman (Kaplan, 1990). Feminism has destroyed the mutual love and distinctive vocation of man and woman, for sacrificial love means giving to the other what the other does not have. Complete equality leaves nothing – either strength or tenderness - to be offered to each other. Moreover, we only have a complete humanity when the male and female character are displayed to the full and their differences exposed the most, just as the fan is most

⁷ 1 Timothy 5:2

⁸ This happens in the English language. In other languages, such as Spanish, such linguistic artifices would be regarded as laughable.

effective when it is widely opened. Only a complete humanity generates the necessary variety⁹ to ensure the sustainability of our social systems. Without the strength of its men and tenderness of its women, a society becomes cowardly, uncaring and ultimately unsustainable.

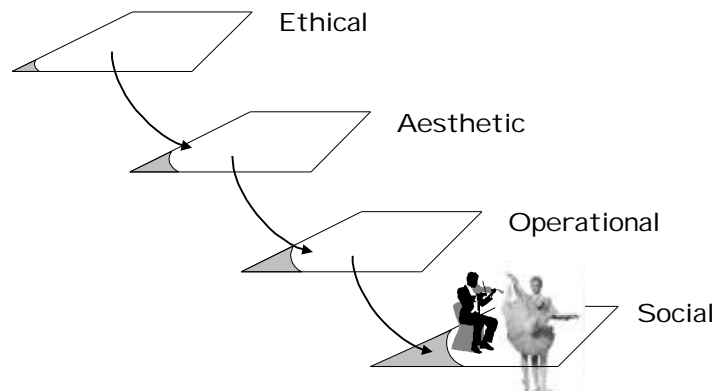


Figure 3: Ethics in Action

We have seen so far how love relates to faith, justice, and the psychic and to masculinity and femininity. However, love, to be real love, must express itself in action, it must be put to work. Self-denial alone is not sufficient, we must also carry our cross. This is done by love entering any modality, turning it into an action in the operational modality, and then transmitting this to the social modality. For example, in the ballet company in Figure 3, love moves from the ethical modality into the aesthetic modality and induces love of beauty. This love of beauty moves next into the operational modality and turns into dance. It then transfers into the social modality where it becomes a social system: a ballet company with ballerinas, male dancers and orchestra. This social system is termed *operational system* because it operates. That is, it performs ballet. (If song rather than dance were the speciality of this company, then it would be most appropriately called *the opera!*) Note also how this operational system materialises ethical love in the male and female roles of the ballet as it gives expression to the tenderness of the ballerina and the strength of the male dancer. There is a perfect balance of the roles. In *Swan Lake*, Odette is given the central focus of the dance without obliterating the lead and energy – both physical and in the plot – provided by Siegfried¹⁰. Classical ballet provides of course, a most elegant and aesthetic representation of tenderness and strength and even of the sacrificial headship alluded to by Lewis in the quote above.

The operationalisation of love for each modality should be found in every social system that culture generates. Thus the church should nurture faith (credal), the family fulfil conjugal love (ethical), the court dispense justice (juridical), the art company perform works of beauty (aesthetic), the school educate (epistemic) and the hospital heal (biotic). Each of these activities is a blend of the ethical, operational, social and the particular modality that characterises the social system. In addition, as love blends with each of these particular modalities, be it faith, ethics, justice, beauty, knowledge or health it generates the sacrificial ethic of each particular vocation¹¹. Unamuno would like to make a religious practice of every form of work but I would go further, and make priesthood out of it. For true priesthood is not the performance of symbolic sacrifices in front of altars, but work performed with sacrificial love. True priesthood is the labour, sweat and tears offered by doctors, teachers, nursing sisters, rubbish collectors, professors, physicians and many others who not only carry their own cross but also help others lug theirs¹².

⁹ In Ashby's terms, this is requisite variety.

¹⁰ Siegfried's hunting brings him to Odette. Yet, though he drives the plot and she waits, he does not deny her the centre stage of the drama.

¹¹ Thus, I prefer the term *vocational* over *normative*.

¹² The New Testament office of pastor, bishop, deacon and elder is to teach, encourage, exhort and lead others in their faith. Nowhere are such offices given the title of priest except that they are regarded so in the general sense applicable to every other office such as are mentioned above (Morris, 1964).

5. Sustaining Ethics

Each of these social systems operating in the particular modality represents a living system exercising life in the particular modality. The artistic company represents the life of beauty. The school gives rise to the life of learning. These lives in each one of the modalities must remain viable; they must be sustained. According to Beer (1979) and my own work based on his (de Raadt, 1991 and 1998), the social unit that sustains the operational system and that ensures its viability, is the metasytem. This metasytem operates in the economic modality and has as its aim to preserve life in every other modality. A viable and sustainable system comprises therefore both social units: an operational system interacting with its environment and a metasytem managing as in Figure 4 which illustrates marriage - the most basic of social structures¹³. Man and woman's love for each other is transferred from the ethical modality to the operational modality where it inspires a number of activities: engendering and bringing up children, offering hospitality to friends and strangers and serving their community. These activities are vital to any society and must also be managed and sustained by a metasytem operating in the economic modality. We have here the most important viable system in society: a viable system that injects love into the community. We shall refer to it as the ethical household or *bayit*¹⁴, to distinguish it from the dis-functional and fragmented modern family. Note that even in the social structure of the viable system we can identify the male and female roles characterising it. The operational system is more masculine, centred on labour and production; the metasytem is more feminine, centring on nurturing and managing in a non-utilitarian manner. Once more, sustainability is dependent on the variety and complement of man and woman's roles.

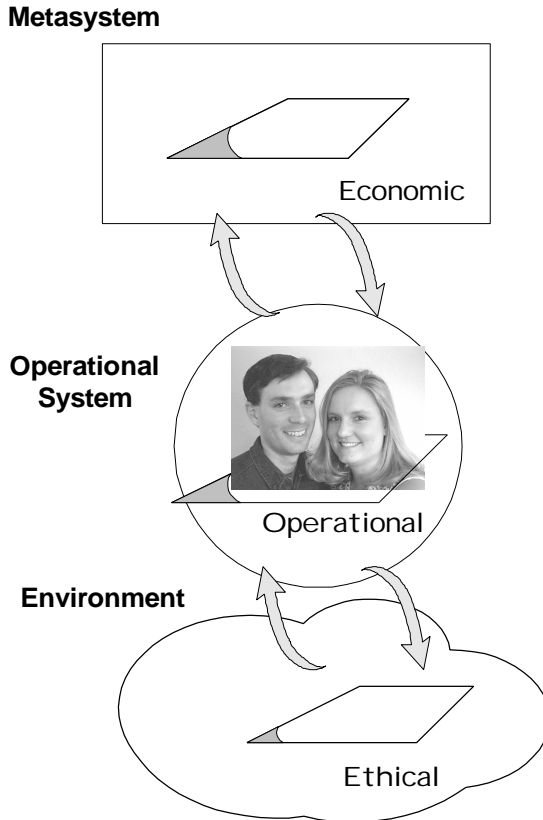


Figure 4: The Bayit

6. Recursive versus Global Systems

The final question that we must answer is how can we make the sustainable social structure of marriage – an ethical microsystem - global. This depends, however, in how we are to understand the word global. Much effort seems to be spent in building a global village with a global market economy. It is built by connecting every social system with each other and for this purpose, the Internet has no doubt provided a marvellous tool. The builders of this global village have however ignored a basic systems principle enunciated by Ashby (1976). A system comprised of a large number of richly interconnected sub-systems – such as the global society we are attempting to build - is highly unstable, and therefore, unsustainable. This is because such a global system cannot reach stability until each one of its sub-systems is stable, but none of its sub-systems can be stable until the whole global system is stable. That is, instability in a sub-system proliferates and makes the whole unsustainable. How can it be made sustainable? Ashby's law specifies two options: the system can become stable by increasing regulatory variety or by eliminating input variety. Since we have limited information and knowledge relative to the vast complexity of a global village, our recourse to regulatory variety is modest. We are therefore left only with the second option. We must standardise. We are forced to take away variety

¹³ Once more, this is different to maximising economic utility as is mostly done in managerial practice today and taught by current managerial theory at management schools.

¹⁴ This is the Hebrew word for household.

from the system by bringing in standardisation. A global system is only viable if it standardises its sub-systems. The Director in *Brave New World* perceived it with piercing clarity:

"My good boy!" The Director wheeled sharply round him. "Can't you see? Can't you see?" He raised a hand; his expression was solemn. "Bokanovsky's Process is one of the major instruments of social stability!"... Standard men and women; in uniform batches. The whole of a small factory staffed with the products of a single bokanovskified egg. "Ninety-six identical twins working ninety-six identical machines!" The voice was almost tremulous with enthusiasm. "You really know where you are. For the first time in history." He quoted the planetary motto. "Community, Identity, Stability." Grand words. "If we could bokanovskify indefinitely the whole problem would be solved." (Huxley, p. 4.)

For us, the Bokanovski's process means uniform "label" clothing, standard cars, standard houses, standard courses, standard textbooks, standard everything. Every attempt is made by our own world directors to constrain as much variety as possible in the very societies that boast to be democratic and liberal. But love cannot be standardised, decreed or implemented in a policy. It can only be personally transmitted. It can also be implanted in the recursive structure of the diverse social systems. In a recursive structure as defined by Beer (1979), principles of viability, appear in each social system without endangering the autonomy of any particular system or level. This is like the genetic code that exists in a seed of an oak tree. The identity of the oak tree is carried by the code within the seed to every trunk, branch, leaf and flower. Through this recursive reproduction, a specific identity is passed from one tree to another without endangering the legitimate extra variety that each

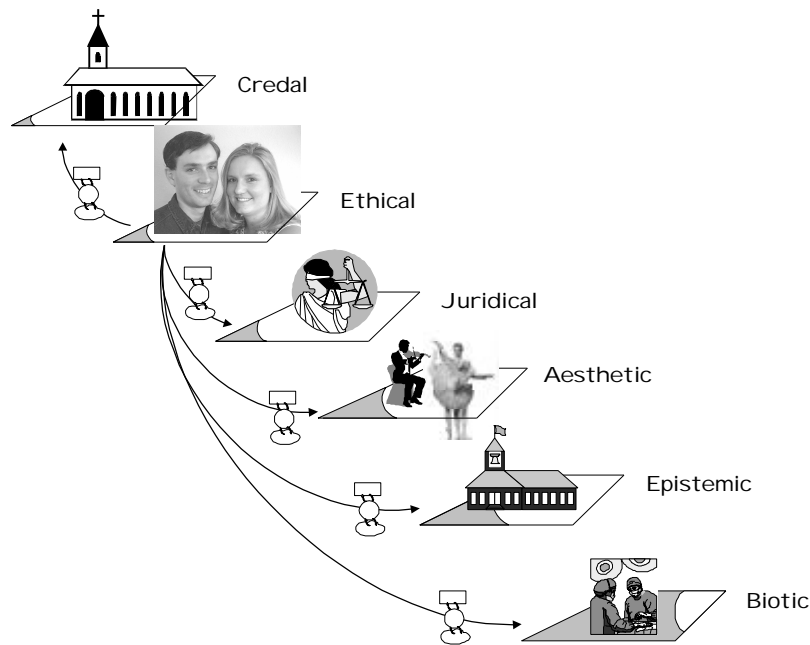


Figure 5: Recursive Ethics

particular tree adds to the original code to make itself unique. Thus, while there is a resemblance between one oak and another due to their common genus *Quercus*, each oak is also different due to the extra variety that is given to every tree. Figure 5 illustrates how, like the seed that passes on life to the Oak, the bayit (ethical household) passes on love to social systems at every modal level. There it is transformed into a love for each one of the modalities be it creed, justice, beauty, learning or health. This ethic brings with it the basic social structure of leadership and nurturing which is essential for men and women to realise their vocations in each social system.

Conclusion

We may now summarise our findings as follows. Ethics is not a code of behaviour listing the things we should do and not do. Ethics is a driving force based on personal love and is received from our relationship with God. Because of the vanity of man, ethics must also be sacrificial to compensate for man injustices. Being personal, ethics is embodied in our full humanity as jointly born by man and woman. Ethics should therefore evince both manly strength and feminine tenderness that should become operational in every field of service and communicated to every social system wherein such services are rendered. Nevertheless, the operation of love must be sustained and this is the task of management. Management should also be an expression of feminine tenderness seeking to ensure the viability of every social system. Finally, the communication of love to all peoples cannot be attained by a centralised global control system, but must be engendered through a recursive structure that carries love like the genetic code of a seed to every social system. And like the seed that must die to be able to transfer its life to the tree, so must ethic incorporate sacrifice to ensure the sustenance of our world.

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