

Multilevel Ethics

Bob Clarke, January 2023

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Levels for Understanding Life (1)

Levels for Understanding Life
(just one way of conceiving them)

The Biosphere (Gaia?)
Ecological – Inter-Species
Inter-Cultural
Social – Cultural
Personal - Mental
Organic - Metabolic
Molecular, incl. Genetic
Biochemical
Chemical
Physical - Quantum Mechanical

Pragmatically, we understand Life by modularising our thought into a hierarchy of many different levels - each level having its own paradigms and perspectives, whether 'scientific' or every-day.

Denis Noble:
There should be No Privileged Level of Description.

See his books:
'The Music of Life' (2006)
'Dance to the Tune of Life' (2016)

SO: ...

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Levels for Understanding Life (2)

Levels for Understanding Life
(just one way of conceiving them)

The Biosphere (Gaia?)
Ecological – Inter-Species
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Personal - Mental
Organic - Metabolic
Molecular, incl. **Genetic**
Biochemical
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Shouldn't we have an Ethics that gives equal weight to all levels?
This is not what we do!

Marxism and Nationalism Ethics privilege this level

Christian and Enlightenment Ethics privilege this level

Richard Dawkins privileged this level

Reductionists privilege this level

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Levels for Understanding Life (3)

Levels for Understanding Life
(just one way of conceiving them)

-- Ethical Levels --

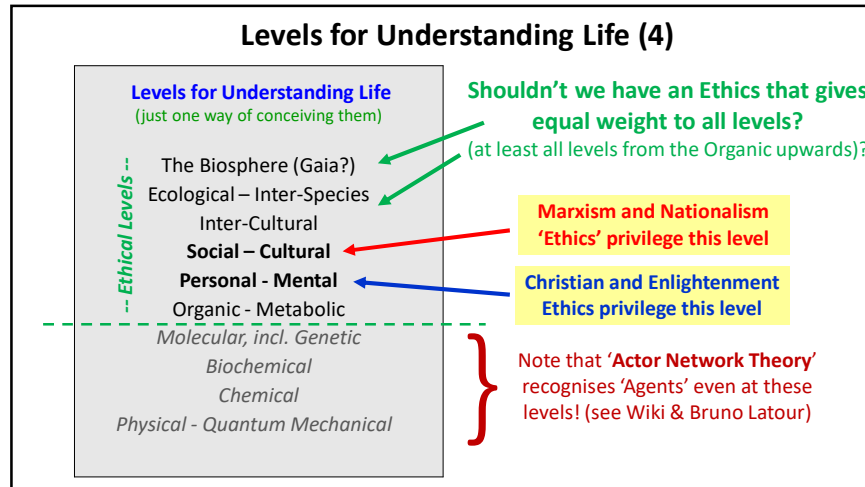
The Biosphere (Gaia?)
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Shouldn't we have an Ethics that gives equal weight to all levels?
(at least all levels from the Organic upwards)?

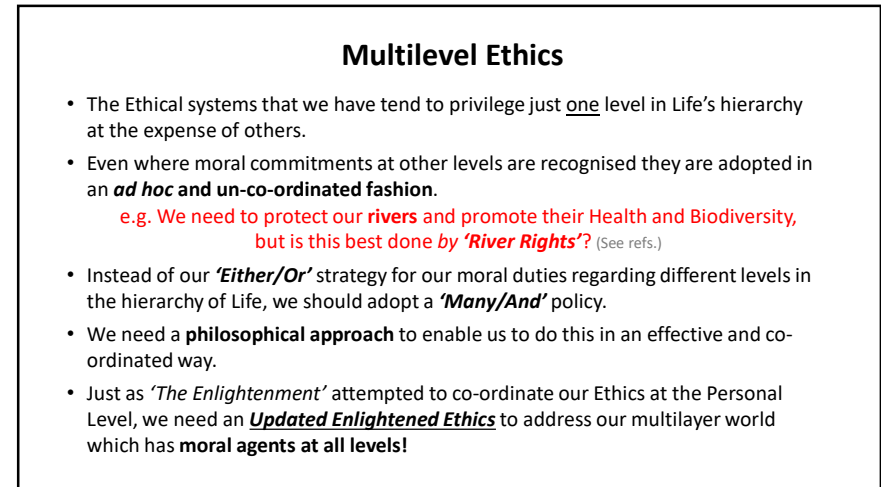
Marxism and Nationalism 'Ethics' privilege this level

Christian and Enlightenment Ethics privilege this level

4



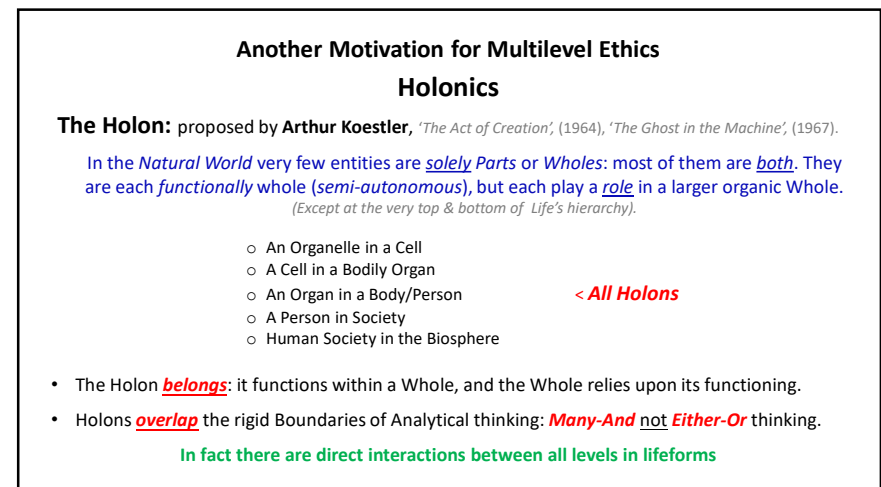
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The West: The Enlightenment: 18th – Early 19th C

In the West we owe our relatively decent Moral Laws and Life Experience to The Enlightenment

But:

- (1): It privileged the **Human/Personal** level
- (2): It got many other things wrong – *as we'll see!* If we can't even get the ethics at our Priority (Personal) level right, what chance do we have for developing a novel Multilevel Ethics?

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The West – The Enlightenment: 18th – Early 19th C

Prioritising the Personal Level

Organelle | Cell | Organ | **Body/Person** | Society | The Biosphere.

- Morally, we typically prioritise the **Body/Person** level, mostly because of our inner life: *The Mind, the Self, The "I", The "Individual"* all reside there.
- This is the level of Life's hierarchy to which **Souls (Religion), Morality** and **Human Rights** normally attach. Our culture emphasizes it's fundamentality.
- What grounds do we really have for believing this level is more morally important than any other level in the Earth's Biosphere?
Denis Noble, 'The Music of Life' (2006), 'Dance to the Tune of Life' (2016).
- Problems arise from this prioritisation: *Selfishness, Divisive Politics, Excessive Litigation ...*

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The West: The Enlightenment: 18th – Early 19th C

- **Some very good features:** application of Rational Thought to benefit all of human-kind (e.g. through Science). **Human Rights**.
- **But** with them came **Property Rights** – ultimately leading to great inequalities: *'Enclosures of the 18th C marked the end of 900 years of communal farming on open fields'* – **Chris Dyer** Leicester University: the decline of community and the rise of Individualism. The end of Feudalism & the start of Capitalism – Specialisation for the market.
From Michael Wood (BBC 2022) see also Guardian, (Aug 2022)
- Slavery, Imperialism and Capitalist Wage Slavery
- Didn't Enlightenment Utilitarianism turn us into mere aggregated statistical units in our leaders' eyes? ... into 'Consumers'?
This was the accusation of F R Leavis in the 'Two Cultures' debate. (See refs).

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The West: The Enlightenment: 18th – Early 19th C

- **'The Right'** (in Politics) very much favours the privilege of Individuals, including Property Rights. **'The Left'** tends to favour Ethics at the Collective Level.
- We normally apportion thanks and blame to individual persons, but Collectives and Nations are also held to account and – these days representatives of Nations apologise for past National wrongs.
- **Limited Companies vs. 'No such thing as Society':** Thatcherism recognised the rights of (bounded) capitalist conglomerate agents such as Limited Companies (Ltds & PLCs), but withheld such recognition from the most prevalent and morally important human conglomerate agent: Human Society! *Why??*

Disorganized *ad hoc* approaches to Ethics!

We need a better Multilevel Enlightenment!

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Other Cultures – Both Left and Right ...

Some of them privilege the Social/Collective/National Level

- This is not too surprising: other animal species do this, e.g. *Social Insects: Bees, Ants*.
- Individuals serve and can be sacrificed by the collective.
No Kantian 'Treat all Persons as Ends in Themselves'!
- In some forms of Marxism: not only are the lives of individual persons of less importance than the collective, but their individual thoughts can be deemed unimportant.
- Nationalisms and Racisms lead to Genocides, e.g. Nazi Germany, China.
- Countries run by Autocratic Demagogues: in Putin's Russia the lives of individual Russians (let alone Ukrainians) are sacrificed for the vision of 'Holy Russia' and the ego-trip pride of the Autocrats. *Maybe this also applied to all sides in the 1st World War!*
- Social Cohesiveness is good, favoured by the Left. But does it turn us into a **Utilitarian Conglomerate**? Can it encourage **Herd Thinking**? Sacrificing **Personal Will** to 'The General Will' (Rousseau)?

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Philosophy Taking a Lead in World Ethics?

- Can we really expect Philosophy to 'take a lead' in formulating a new comprehensive Multilevel Ethics for the world? Isn't that rather naïve ?
- Some critics argue that intellectual (philosophical) positions generally follow practical steps taken by real actors embedded in a hands-on way in the world (& the philosophers then get the credit for beneficial changes that take place!).

I'd say this is rather too pessimistic

Enlightenment thinkers did attempt to take a lead in bettering the world and did originate new concepts

The United Nations was an Enlightenment Concept: first mooted by Leibniz (& others) & then worked up by Kant in his essay 'Perpetual Peace' (1795). He proposed a 'Federation of Free States' (all Republics!)

The UN was realised by politicians much later ... the vision and idea that was sown by philosophers eventually reached fruition.

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Philosophy Taking a Lead in World Ethics? *contd.*

Likewise in Britain **Bentham's Utilitarian** philosophical principles became part of government policy in Britain after **The Great Reform Act** (1832) They were associated with several reform acts at that time:

- *The Factory Act of 1833*
- *The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 !!!!!*
- *The Prison Act of 1835*
- *The Municipal Corporations Act of 1835*
- *The Committee on Education in 1839*
- *The Lunacy Act of 1845 ??*
- *The Public Health Act of 1845.*

The State (the Government) was **for the First Time** seen as having some responsibility for **Public Health and Conditions in the Workplace**.

Utilitarianism is meant to be a **Moral Principle**:
but it requires an ability to **predict consequences** correctly!

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Progressing 'The Enlightenment Project'

Some folks urge 'us to return to' Enlightenment Thinking see Pinker & Neiman refs.

But returning to the past is not what we need

We should Continue to Progress the Enlightenment Project that we already have!

Onora O'Neill, 'Constructions of Reason' (1989):

- '*Kant ... in the Second Preface [to CPR invites] new readers to join in an enterprise that has already drawn to it various critics and fellow workers*'; p 8.
- This is *The Enlightenment Project*. The open-endedness of the Project was clear to all those who advocated it (at least to the Empiricists).
- '*The task of recruiting new fellow workers to the task [Kant's project] is central to both prefaces [of the CPR], its success more confidently anticipated in the second*'; p 9.
 - We have greatly progressed Enlightenment **Natural** Philosophy (Science)
 - Why can't we progress Enlightenment **Ethical** Philosophy ?

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Kant's Categorical Imperative

Two Formulations (out of 4)

Kant 'Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals', (1785):

A: Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end

B: Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

Kant insisted that these amounted to the same principle.
Most later philosophers have disagreed!

I propose that they are grounded in the same moral commitment, but that they are best applied to two separate levels in Life's hierarchy.

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Enlightenment: The CI at the Collective/Political Level

Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

Think of an Enlightenment Intellectual proposing a Constitution and Laws for a new Republic

Onora O'Neill, 'Constructions of Reason', (1989):

- 'The most fundamental principle for disciplining thought and action among any plurality is to reject principles for thought and action that cannot be shared'. p 21
- 'The Categorical Imperative is only a strategy for avoiding principles of thinking, communicating and acting that cannot be adopted by all members of a plurality whose principles of interaction are not established by any transcendent reality'. p 24
- 'The sensus communis is ... a critical faculty which in its reflective act takes account ... of the mode of representation of everyone else, in order, as it were, to weigh its judgement with the collective reason of mankind'. p 25 (Kant CJ V, 293)
- How about: 'The sensus ecologicus is a critical faculty which in its reflective act takes account of the mode of representation of all living beings, in order, as it were, to weigh its judgement with the collective reason of all of the biosphere' ??

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A Multi-Level Enlightenment?

How do we start? Some random thoughts:

- Progress the Enlightenment Project ... *Take Kant further?* - Extend the CI to all levels of Life. How?
- Certainly include insights from Deep Ecology – how has it developed over the last 40 years? (See Wiki)
- Expand access to 'The Commons'.
- Teach Holonics (Koestler).
- Remove 'Who's in the Club?' criteria. Human Society has many sub-cultures and institutions which we must accommodate and we must apply this principle across the whole of the Biosphere.
- The Second House of Parliament: Not 'The House of Lords' but a 'House for Cultural Collectives' with specified moral goals.
- *Alternative Hierarchies: e.g. determined by Music? See Mahler 3!*

Note however: It's all very well recognising the multi-level import of Ethics. But decisions still have to be made at our human personal Level.

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Out of the Box Thought!:

You may not like **my** hierarchy .
 Try alternative Hierarchies: e.g. determined by Music?

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Gustav Mahler uses a different analysis (or hierarchy) in his 3rd Symphony

What the Flowers of the Field tell me
What the Animals Tell me
What Man tells me
What the Angels tell me
What Love tells me!

'Imagine a work so large that
it mirrors the entire world –
one is only an instrument the
Universe plays upon ' ...

And his other symphonies (quite deliberately) attempt understandings
 from even more different perspectives.