Reasonable Solutions of the Social Order: Causes of Suffering for the Poor

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Efforts to make life more bearable and meaningful aim to make the human condition more orderly to lessen the effects not only of natural misfortunes but also of human-made conflicts and adversities. These efforts have come down to us as common approaches or ways of making life more manageable; these may be part of a wider popular culture or the more systematic ways of managing the state of political and economic affairs of a modern/post-modern society. These also provide moral or ethical standards which every citizen considers as binding or obligatory. However, products of human minds and hands are always saddled by limits and flaws. Nothing produced by humans, even the solutions to certain problems, is free from the fragility of human dispositions, human ambivalence, and the ambiguities of nature and the social order. All of these cause suffering, especially for the poor.

Whatever Happened to Shared Responsibility and Automatic Assistance?

*A*utomatic assistance was common to feudal settings where the lords or masters took care of their serfs' needs, or heads of clans or families pooled common resources together to solve distress-causing scarcities. Responsibility was commonly understood as a shared one, a property of mutual assistance or solidarity among members of a society constituted by kinship or community fellowship – a *Gemeinschaft*.[1] Capitalism, however, has exerted undeniable pressures on traditional communities. It has done it through its organized purposive activities through state regulations[2] and through

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1. This is not to idealize *Gemeinschaft* but to illustrate a certain social relationship which is not common in complex urbanized settings.

its reified ethos and practices. Family forms and relations have taken specific configurations that are consistent with the demands or requirements of the capitalist productive aspects of life. Capitalism has slowly shaped individuals and families into precursor cultural agents of non-traditional identities. The traditional roles/institutions and their ideological foundations take some shattering blows from capitalism's fields, processes, and social and cognitive structures. Capitalism has shaped and re-shaped shared social patterns and dispositions from/within which personal embodiments certainly take their mold. These occupy the front seat in transforming not only production and expenditure/consumption relations but also former patterns of enduring bodily and psychic dispositions.

The breakdown of feudal institutions (lordship, vassalage, fiefdom, tenancy and the centrality of the land and patronage-fidelities) and other traditional socio-cultural arrangements of nineteenth century Europe were in no way caused by a single factor. Nevertheless, it is easy to identify industrial capitalism which has evolved around the centralized production units as the single most powerful and fundamental trigger leading to socio-cultural breakdowns. These breakdowns have taken many paths and have produced many forms which engendered various social ills or perceived social ills. Various scholars have identified those ills as alienation, anomie, class conflicts, neo-colonial domination and dependence, civil apathy, possessive individualism – all pointing to breakdown of bonds leading towards collapse of solidarity.

The shift from the household-type to factory-based industry has not only disturbed and split the household from their members but also from its traditional culture that has cradled it for generations. The capitalist factory industry is founded on totally different principles which have caused no small negative effects on traditional principles like kinship automatic solidarity and informal neighborly mutual help.

Automatic assistance is now confined and constricted within families and especially within the shrunk family setting, the nuclear family. The suffering outside the family or household is no longer one's responsibility. Blood and intimate relations have provided the

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2. Cf. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology,* vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 375ff.

grounds and boundaries for automatic assistance to the needy. Social suffering has become subject to this acceptable confinement. This is where one finds the common sense arrangement of helping applicable mainly to relations by blood or affinity. Reaching out to a suffering but non-family-member will always pass through some conditions built by automatic assistance.

All other forms of helping behavior will pass through the format of calculation whether coming from the state, churches, NGOs, workers' organizations, and other forms of associations. Calculated assistance looks for some justification in terms of being appropriate or constructive; it seeks its worthy beneficiaries like the poorest of the poor or the gifted indigent and rejects the unworthy ones like the "lazy" or the opportunists.

Most subscribe to the family parameter of automatic helping behavior. This is the parameter that dictates pragmatism and calculation as today's proper approach to helping those outside the family circle. These are the same values that mold us to become normal citizens in what is regarded as a normal society. Our society is also built around the values that, at the same time, impose limits on helping behavior. It is thus not difficult for many to behave according to the social habits offered for the development of individuals. Most of us are already predisposed to behave according to society's standards and expectations. Even for those who profess to become ministers and disciples of Jesus, acting as the neighbor seems to be truly constrained by common sense and calculation rather than by impulse of compassion.

Jesus of Nazareth initially directed the attention of his listeners to a familiar figure of a victim of robbery, an injured person who thus becomes one of the needy (Luke 10:30-37) – someone who fits the notion of a neighbor. Every common sense understanding of the neighbor is satisfied by this identification of the victim as one in need of help. The moment Jesus brings the priest and the Levite into the scene, attention shifts away from the needy and towards the priest and the Levite who are possible agents of assistance. Both characters stand out but they are not seen as external to the situation. They are observed and sized up in terms of the presence of the needy whose predicament clearly appeals for assistance. When that appeal is twice ignored by the priest and the Levite because of their

fidelity to religious or ritual requirements, the needy gets more deprived. This double deprivation magnifies further that meaning of the neighbor as in need of assistance. The one in need gets more deprived after the robbery and after the avoidance.

For Jesus, the recurring pattern of inattention and avoidance must stop. He brings in the person who will initiate a contrasting series of attention. The Samaritan's interventions give the needy more attention than what was probably necessary. Jesus then takes this extraordinary scenario to emphasize the neighbor-giver meaning identified through the Samaritan who shatters the ordinary neighbor-needy definition. Because of the neighbor who gives, the receiver of help gets more attention and gradually ceases being in need. The helping neighbor has contributed to the diminishing of the neighbor's passive meaning. The sense of the neighbor as active subject definitely draws thought away from the common sense meaning of the passive object of help. This also suggests the magnitude of every extraordinary act beyond norms and ordinary habits of helping.

Jesus urges everyone to emulate the good Samaritan, thus, avoiding the meaning of neighbor from getting entangled with ritual avoidance or civilized inattention. For Jesus, to be a neighbor is not just to be compassionate but also to get past our common sense and calculations that derive strength from traditions and all that produce either weary or cynical behavior. Helping requires behaving beyond the ordinary predisposition.

When Jesus points to the good Samaritan as the neighbor, he blasts at hearts predisposed to the limitations set by norms. When Jesus highlights the appropriate action which flows from a neighborly compassionate heart, he reproaches an attitude that routinely fixes the neighbor as the needy or the suffering. He has also established such appropriate action as intrinsic to the meaning of neighbor. He defines the desirable behavior instead of focusing on the worn-out meaning of the word – correcting common, economic, moral, and scientific sense. This behavior gives substance and meaning derived from impulse of compassion and not from being embedded in systems. The word neighbor becomes more active and free as it is coupled with the appropriate and defining automatic compassionate behavior.

Our felt compassion, however, does not automatically translate into neighborly behavior. Compassion is not automatically expressed since it has been bombarded by habitual or reasoned measurements. Compassion has become a property of every form of habit or calculation. Suffering is not something to which we are always able to respond automatically and with compassion. We reason out or stay as a bystander (a bystander in a public setting often does not help because he sees the possibility that other people might extend their help). Only after counting the cost, assessing the situation or measuring the benefits do we help or not help. But very often, we are stuck in our habits and fail to extend our help. The Kevin Carter case,[3] the Jericho Experiment of Darley and Batson,[4] and the stranded fish and the discussants (the fish ending dead because of over-discussion among those who are "interested" in helping) all point to this problem.

SOCIAL ORDER: INSIDE EVERY WILL'S DESIRE

My wife and I went to market one very early morning. She did the buying while I sat and waited in front of a still closed shop. A greasy man suddenly appeared and sat beside me. I instantly sniffed a very strong and offensive smell floating in the air. It came from him and it so powerfully penetrated my nostrils that I could not bear the smell. It was torture for an asthmatic person like me. I stood up and left my place, went over the other side of the store and took a vacant space. But a man was there causing another irritation - a smoker. I was lucky when his wife appeared from the market and signalled for him to leave. I was relieved but not for long. The greasy man was there again sitting beside me. I felt furious; I looked at him with angry eyes. He looked at me with a blank stupid look. I gave up and left my place. I found another vacant place that made me happy

3. "Kevin Carter (1961-1994), took his own life months after winning the Pulitzer Prize for feature photography for a haunting Sudan famine picture." http://picturenet.co.za/photographers/kc/, access 30 April 2008. See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kevin_Carter.

4. See J. M. Darley and C.D. Batson, "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 27 (1973): 100-108.

where the greasy man could no longer sit beside me. There was no one smoking in that place. I found a space that suited my habit and expectations. I felt I found my world.

We do not just avoid the obnoxious; we also look for our place, a choice space to stay calm, clean, peaceful and orderly. We also deal with people and reality according to the order of things we have been habituated into. For some who cannot stand a traditional cosmology,[5] a pursuit of a different one may be launched. We have available sets of constructed cosmologies through millennia of working, producing, consuming, worshipping, and reproducing.

We do not mind if there is a storm, a part of our bigger cosmos and something which we can no longer complain about. But we can somehow complain and do something to ourselves and our cosmos when an entity is within our reach – something which we can reorganize, transform, and refit with our abilities. In trying to deal with contingencies, people try to find ways to resolve the situation of disorder by making it fit into their sense of order and truth. People create and are created by their culture. That is what happens when we think of ourselves as cultured.

Sense of order and truth classifies suffering people into family obligations, welfare beneficiaries, NGO-dependents, or Church charity so that reality for normal life is suited to one's habits and expectations. Suffering people are thus named for easier handling. It is a human response to give handles to things that are difficult to predict and control. The suffering lot are named as beneficiaries of welfare calculated and allocated by dispensaries such as the state, the churches, the NGOs, and foundations. Society has assigned and defined for them a place in the social structure that is fitted into every sense of order. Mary Douglas's idea of dirt explains: anything, including dirt, is proper ("clean") for as long as it is within its assigned place.[6]

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5. Cosmology talks about the totality of elements and their connections in a given order like the universe. In the anthropological sciences, cosmos may be understood as the whole order, one's socio-culturally ordered reality where one would find and take one's place.

6. See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1966); see also her *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).

Jesus's neighbor will somehow be forced to follow the social construction of helping behavior – our familiar relations and habits thus become the Procrustean bed for all the needy. Jesus will somehow be forced to accept defeat and so die again in modern and post-modern hands. After all, "there is only one Christian, and he died on the cross" proving his point.[7] Christian-followers do not seem to have the capacity to emulate him and thus abandon their common sense view of the word neighbor. Jesus, of course, was ready to suffer to show his point.

Most reflections about suffering focus on the common sense understanding of the word neighbor – the one who suffers and who is in need. Suffering is something one is subjected to because of various factors: poverty, discrimination, age, intellect, education, gender, nationality, ethnicity, etc. The other meaning of suffering as a product of our common sense or practical approach to a normal life is not given much attention, i.e., suffering is the contradictory but integral side of all common sense, scientific, and normative pursuits. Normal life in society is also a reason why there is so much suffering. The reason there is so much senseless suffering is that we tend to stick to normal solutions.

SUFFERING AND SOLUTIONS: SUFFERING BECAUSE OF SOLUTIONS

Most forms of suffering are subjected to a problem-solving process. They are subjected to actual ritual or response meant to alleviate suffering or address their causes. Diseases are sometimes caused by viruses or bacteria. These cause bodily pain, damage or deterioration no matter who is afflicted. The extent of pain or damage may depend on one's stamina, resistance, or financial capability. Unemployment and poverty as causes of suffering require the correlate bias for skills or for cash. One suffers because the setting requires skills or money. The primary cause of suffering is the lack of skills or money. The setting makes possible for lack of skills or money to become primary causes. Within a different setting where

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7. A reference to Nietzsche: "The very word 'Christianity' is a misunderstanding — in truth, there was only one Christian, and he died on the cross." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), Sec. 39.

one could work as unskilled, or one could eat one's produce, poverty of skill and cash becomes irrelevant. The order of things, thus, would either abet or prevent unemployment and poverty as causes of suffering. In our time and in our setting, if one is not skilled or if one has no money, one will surely suffer.

Because of our setting, the production of different and multiple ways of alleviating suffering have attained a machine-like rate. This does not only reflect the multiplication of desires to alleviate suffering but also an indication of multiplication of cases of suffering. Some cases not considered problems before are now treated with seriousness: overweight, bad breath, body odor, vaginal odor, armpit color, breast size, penis size, coarse skin, and baldness. Most of these problems are fused to the individual. Some could qualify them further as vanity-rooted problems. The solutions offered are, however, catered to everyone including the poor and the unemployed. Our setting's solutions have become centered on individual problems. Such solutions cause suffering to people who do not have problems with their penises or breasts. They cause problems to people who might be unskilled and so unemployed or impecunious and so starving. But we formulate a question linked to our previous questions: Is that our problem?

If we allow ourselves to be drawn into the problems of the unemployed or the impecunious, we might really be disturbing the status of things which assures us of stability. While if we just deal with our individual imperfections and odors, we may not multiply our burdens. To add other people's burden to ours will destroy our order of priorities. Not to meddle with their affairs will maintain our state of affairs. Thus, giving assistance to the needy is not just a question of time and resources; it is also a question of dissonance management. Assisting the suffering is itself a problem for most of us, something which threatens our affective security as well as our cognitive comforts. We must follow the order of things to avoid this secondary kind of suffering:

> The suffering lot are their own families' obligations. Where are their parents? Why are their relatives not taking care of them? I have my own family and my own obligations. Let the sufferers take care of themselves.

Since the solution to unemployment is education or skills acquisition, we always say "educate the poor." "Let the state, the churches, and the NGOs take care of their education." "Let them observe the adage: Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day; teach him how to fish and he will eat for a lifetime." But this solution may become another source of suffering for the skilled if he has no place to fish and if that place is not available to him or is nowhere to be found.

Primary effects of poverty and unemployment (starvation, homelessness, lack of education, etc.) also produce secondary effects like stress or low self-esteem. While the primary effects cause more visible damage, the secondary effects can cause progressive invisible ones. When we avoid them, we are not just avoiding the victims of poverty and unemployment; we are actually avoiding multiple troubles to enter into our world. This avoidance saves us from inflating trouble. But this causes more problems for those who are most affected.

Solutions are also gained as results of balancing or mutual adjustments between roughly equal forces. If the unrepresented poor and civil society were not present, what kind of solution will they get from the fruit of balancing? Most solutions that we take and impose on those absent others are those that ask beneficiaries to be present in our order of things. We ask them to integrate into our world of exchange and consumption. Their entry into our world affords us some facility for handling. When a person with disease enters the clinic, the physician is at home to handle the case, diagnose the ailment, and produce the cure. The social belongingness and stability that we enjoy are also tools that give so much familiarity to our prescriptions. We need the familiarity to facilitate diagnosis and cure. This, however, is another source of suffering for the poor and the unemployed. By forcing them to become like us, we force them to bind themselves to a regimen. So that when they are changed, our world will become more comfortable.

Poor people have their own rituals and norms that provide compensatory and coping means in the face of adversities. If these cultural elements are far, invisible, or even "erased" through our integrating or civilizing processes many things could happen. The old forms (poor people going to their indigenous healers; hungry ones looking for their extended family; the unemployed pulling some

friendly strings, etc.) may be forced to be de-traditionalized. The poor may no longer regard them as traditions because of the newer traditions (formal, legal, contractual, scientific) which they have to learn and internalize and consider as obligatory. The new traditions may not provide them sufficient means to deal with adversities. The new traditions may become sources of new forms of suffering which need (e.g. debate about religion/ritual as opium for stress and non-compliance of ritual as new source of stress)[8] rituals that are no longer there. More secularized rituals (like Jollibee meals, graduations, promotions) could become double stressors. They cause cyclical stress that search for a deeper connection with others through common rituals. But many of these common rituals have become dull and maybe are not always available because secularized rituals have proliferated and have become more significant for person-centered individuals. Our offer of escape, in fact, offers new lines for the poor's recapture.

MINISTERS OF SUFFERING: ANOTHER SOURCE OF SUFFERING

Individuals expect so much from their surroundings and from other people. Inasmuch as their inner world has expanded, they naively expect that the expansive inner world of other individuals are ready to accommodate their faults and stupidities. Transactions are ever presumptive of absorptive capacities, when in fact, reactions to another's presence recalls more of the protocols before one could enter into the world of the other. This is true even when one talks about friendship, intimate relations, and ministerial relations.

Priests, by their vow of chastity which presumes a person's identity is always available to everyone, are not immune to assumption of individual rights to erect borders against external intrusions. This they learn even when still young, that is, before having entered the seminary. Religious vows could not assure an automatic transformation towards availability and openness to service. Availability and openness to

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8. See George C. Homans, "Anxiety and Ritual: The Theories of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown," in William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, eds., *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach,* 4th ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 57-62.

service are things which no one has ever been assiduously culturally initiated to as a child by parents or guardians. Agency cannot beg questions.

The rituals dispensed by the parish are not necessarily common activities in the sense of shared and community-planned programs. They are mostly fixed rituals, almost unconsciously followed. They demarcate the moments that consequently allow ample private time for the priest. The priest's scheduled rituals have also the effect of clearing space and time for privacy. Most of the time, he serves about two hours of commissioned work and outside that is private time. The minister's time outside the two-hour required work has been appropriated for personal use. For those who serve, I may just cite an instance where ministers can become slaves of the state-of-affairs of ministering to the needy. I am referring to the dispensation of surplus-reasons or state-of-the-art ethics.

ETHICS, SCIENCE AND ITS HOPES

Science, which is a male-dominated one, has tried to take control of the outer and inner worlds. The sense of progress of science has always been linked somehow to this concern for control and prediction. Such is the science of welfare not necessarily concerned with the poor but with controlling and predicting troubles that affect a normalized society. It has not been successful, however, in mastering the unintended consequences of its efforts. In every move that it takes, in every language it deploys, and in every scheme that it proposes, the total outcome has always gone beyond the scope of its planning center. As a result, what science has done is to set aside some contingency measures which try to take care of the unknown quirks. At the same time, science pursues "progress" through realities which constantly eludes it.

Nevertheless, scientific discourse and theory do not have enough capacity to appease itself against the backdrop of its contingent, both reliable and unreliable nature as well as the expectant humanity that relies on its efficiency. It somehow reels over its unconvincing treatment of the many unpleasant consequences and unruly human drives. Take a look at those drives which constantly seek the lowest level of tension, i.e., towards homeostasis through food, drink, sex,

spirituality, or religion. A constant problem troubling people is the elusive quest for identity and fulfillment. This is not well understood or handled by science which, at the same time, is caught in its own limited and contingent language. Science tries to position itself above people's yearning for fulfillment. Worse, some people are outside the spaces which "progress" has shaped for modernity. Science has its victims whose predicaments refer back to science's limits. These victims include the environment, the poor, the elderly, the women, and the very young. People's drives and sufferings which are simply beyond modern science's language of control and prediction are also suggestive of the limits of science.

Those limits of science are also the limits of ethics when it poses itself as a science. Ethics (as ethics of reason) simply cannot avoid being part of the world of consequential destructions. Ethics can be limited by its rational armory which, in the first place, has affinity with every scientific language. Ethics cannot simply collapse drives into the unethical. Such drives seek fulfillment in the inventions and promises of science. A rational guide for behavior provided by ethics is one of these promises. The prestige of ethics is married to the language of science that has also incited the activation of every self-seeking drive.

The unconscious and socio-cultural structures, operational and symbolic, as limits of the tools of autonomous reason remind people of the constrained nature of their ethics of reason. To a great extent, a communitarian ethics or the ethics of solidarity hurdles this constraint through the *less-reasonable acts of compassion* framed, of course, by settings that engender effective broader social bonds. We are reminded here of Pascal's "*Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point.*" –The heart has reasons which reason knows nothing. This also means "I care therefore I am" contra "I think therefore I am." By circumscribing the constructions and destructions of reason through community acts of solidarity, the desire and the rationalizations of science or capital are confounded by less-reasoned compassion à la good Samaritan.

The ethics of the visible and controllable can only deal with what it really can deal as able people follow the logic and reason of the clear and distinct ideas and practices. As something clear and logical, ethics can only be followed as an appeal to an able reason

that is used to hearing logic and documented reasoning. Since people only understand what they can, the need for an ethics of understanding what people cannot as yet understand is still acute. The propositions of the Greek philosophers, rationalists, empiricists, other philosophers of intention (Cogito), and the psychologists of the subject-ego, are all logical for as long as people want them to be understood.

For a rational ethics, some kind of ethical stance which addresses the need of those whom society cannot control can be looked at. The needs of the following types of people need attention: the poor, elderly, sick, homeless, fugitive, beggar, AIDS victim, suicidal youth, and addicts. They are the correlates of our society's ways and reason's accomplishments. Rational ethics does have a much logical and reasoned-out answer to offer. But one may ask what logical propositions can the victims of society understand? Is there anything that people can show them as reasonable salvation? What would be the step to convince them of their becoming potential ethical subjects of their confounding predicament? I suppose not much from the surplus-reasoning of cogitative or ego-dynamic propositions; except perhaps from humanity's less-reasoned compassion that should also be freed towards solidarity work.

CONCLUSIONS: CONTRADICTIONS AND SURPLUS-REASONS

The unknown, the unknowable, and the open but less noticeable possibilities defy all attempts in the systematization of an ethics that is based on what the conscious mind or rational intentionality grasps as good or as the ground of what is good. Even the most comprehensive of ethical formulations that one can imagine does have to bend before that which is impossible to categorize or calculate. This is because it is cut away from humanity that is preoccupied with contingencies.

Modernity has produced an optimism based on its visible accomplishments and capacities for further accomplishments. However, it has discovered pessimism that springs out from its destructiveness towards those inner and outer realities that it cannot arrange. Indicators of its destructiveness include the holocaust, world wars, ozone layer hole, environmental cooling/warming, resistant viruses and bacteria, the CIA operations in the Third World, and

George Bush, Jr. and his Iraq/Muslims. They are indeed challenges to modernity's pretenses and misapprehensions. Such contradictions of modernity/late-modernity have been the stuff of histories of success and suffering. The middle histories of neither success nor suffering are tensional states of the two strands which are of greater interest to ethnographers.

Systematic ethics is based on the belief that the mind – conscious, aware, intentional – can define what is really good and can assess what is not good. Systematic ethics, in fact, does reflect a desire based on visible accomplishments and confidence in its capacities for more visible inventions. While the majority of humanity suffers from stress, pain, and frustrations, an ethics based on rational visions (cf. mission-vision of some agencies) celebrates the presumption that words about what is good and what is doable good are indeed invested with power. As this kind of ethics would put before man and, before worlds so opaque, there is nothing so presumptuous and so unnoticeable in those powers that produce miseries and impulsiveness in its inhabitants. They cause more suffering.

If our formulation of ethics is based on the logical speculations about the good as distinct from what is noticeably not good, it seems that people are merely touching indicators which can be cleaned up and be separated from those which people showcase as ethical. Ethics collapses the unnoticeable (and even the unacceptable) to what is clear to the mind. Conceiving independently from what is unnoticeable, ethics can only produce tools and principles for the healing of a visible wound. People delight in this accomplishment and make it the basis of the talk about the total person, the good life, or the good society. But there are more to life's visible wounds; the invisible is oftentimes too much for common sense, for the academe's scientific sense, and the traditional hierarchy's normative sense.

One of the most frustrating things about ethics is the way it makes sense of or deceives itself about the sufferings and frustrations of people. It cannot go beyond its utterances simply because, as self-reflections, it is part of the whole story of accomplishments and destructiveness. With its propositions for good behavior and ethical action, it cannot go behind its language. It cannot hide behind

the rational mind's tradition that is gripped by the reality of unnoticeable mechanisms and causes of suffering.

Ethics can no longer rely on influencing the people's minds through abstract rational principles derived from or applicable to what it can control, simply because there are too many things outside its control. There are far too many people who have more associations than the abstract ethical principles or norms could move. There is probably not much reason for surplus-reasoning when the other needs just a glass of water to drink.

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