

The Basis of Individual and Social Ethics

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In his life, both personal and social, man is in need of a number of non-material objectives. Every social system requires a number of objectives which are common between individuals, without which social life would be impossible in its true sense. For, social life means co-operation and attainment of common goals, both material and spiritual. The common goals of some people may be material, such as commercial or industrial companies which are formed by a number of people providing the capital and others providing the labor.

But human society cannot be managed like a company, since its basis is quite different from that of a firm. This is of course, our view, while there are others like Bertrand Russell who think that the basis of social ethics is only individual interest. They consider social ethics as a kind of contract between individuals, which they uphold as the best means of safeguarding their interests. Russell gives the following example to illustrate his point. He says: "I wish to get possession of my neighbor's cow, but I realize that if I do so, his reaction will be to seize mine, and another neighbor, too, may do the same. Thus, instead of getting a profit, I suffer a loss. So

I consider it advisable to respect his right and let him keep his cow, so that I may. Russell believes the basis of social ethics to be a respect for individual rights. We may say robbers, too, have the same relationship, in being bound together for robbing and enforcing some kind of justice among themselves, since they cannot act alone. That is why we say that Russell's motto is at variance with his philosophy. His motto is humanitarian, but his philosophy is contrary to it. By considering self-interest as the basis of social ethics, we are making it compulsory for an individual to co-operate with others since he fears their reaction if they possess similar power and strength. But if a man reached a stage where he was sure that others were too weak to hurt him, there is no need to observe those moral principles.

Suppose Nixon and Brezhnev to be equally powerful, in facing each other they calculate that it is to their interest to respect their mutual expectations. But if each of them faces a weak nation, there is no necessity for such a respect. Russell's criticism of the United States in fighting Vietnam would then appear to be unacceptable!

In any case, their school of thought is injudicious, for, it permits the strong to constrain the weak. If the weak have no tolerance for constraint they must try to become strong. Politically this may be true, but it is not ethics, for, the weak cannot persuade the strong to act otherwise.

Arbitrary conduct would seem permissible for the strong in the political school of thought, Any school of thought may be based on the same common material goals, but it ought to suggest other ways of checking depravity. By saying that the causes of individual aggression should be investigated and then removed, these causes are not necessarily related to human or intellectual or educational constraints.

If you ask what barrier there is against the aggression of the strong against the weak, they may say: the society should be built from the beginning in such a way that there would exist no strong or weak individuals in it. If the sources of strength and weakness are discovered and removed, then all men will be at the same level, and because of their equality of power, they will respect one another. That is possible, according to them, by doing away with private ownership of wealth/property. Getting rid of ownership will put an end to human inequalities/transgressions A society where all men have a common material goal, will be managed like a real co-operative enterprise in which there will be no injustice.

The school of Marxism is almost such a school, where no emphasis is laid on human spirituality and there is no talk of moral conscience etc, The emphasis is on ownership which, according to them, is the source of all wickedness and oppression. private ownership is replaced by state or societal ownership, so that each individual works according to his ability and receives compensation from the state or society in proportion to his needs . This is believed to be naturally conducive to establishment of peace, tranquility, justice and good morals will be established there. All evils, such as enmity, hatred and other complexes, are then expected to be removed, and all will live in brotherhood and equality.

But this is all wrong for the following reasons: It is actually shown that in societies where private ownership has been abolished, oppression, and deviation continue to exist. If the socialists were right in their reformatory claim, as soon as society is organized on a communist basis, it would be impossible for it to suffer corruption again. On the other hand, we have often witnessed that communist societies purge their own leading members from time to time.

Private ownership, therefore, cannot be the only factor for gaining privileges. Firstly, privileges do not consist only of money and deals, There are many others which are valued by human beings, For a woman being more beautiful than others is an advantage, which has nothing to do with ownership, and in a communist system, too, it has its own place. More important than that are the privileges of rank and position, Rockefeller who has been one of the richest men in the world, has always had a longing for being elected President of the United States. Sometimes such a desire is so strong that many a wealthy man is willing to sacrifice most of his wealth to fulfill it, and gain fame and honor as a man of power. Man has

always valued being respected by others no matter whether it is through fear, or affection and devotion.

Are there not men who would be in the place of Ayatullah Boroujerdi, so that people would be eager to meet them, kiss their hands, bring gifts to them, and feel honored to be received by them? Do they not wish to be a king so that hundreds of officers and men would stand to attention before him, even if it is through fear? These things, then, are valued by human beings, otherwise they would not be willing to lose everything else to gain such an advantage.

Therefore, the root cause of human transgressions and social evils is not only wealth. There are also other factors which cannot be overcome by communism, Secondly, when other privileges are secured by their previous advantages, even in a communist society the profits of those possessing better advantages are greater. For example, would the interest on the wealth of a Soviet leader be equal to that of a peasant, even if he represents the peasantry. A peasant may never get the experience of travel by plane even once in his life, while his leader has the best aircraft at his disposal. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that the advantage of wealth is solved by communism, nor that individuals will benefit equally from societal wealth.

Do our own civil servants benefit equally from public funds which are beyond private ownership. A man in a higher position enjoys much higher advantages than an ordinary employee.

What is significant is that even in the same communist societies, there arise needs for self-sacrifice and relinquishment of material advantages. For example, a soldier who goes to fight and is killed, is not killed on the basis of mutual interest. He must be motivated by certain ideals or sentiment to be willing to offer his life for their sake. So, the most materialistic school cannot do without some kind of spiritual values, even if he turns his conviction into something to be worshipped.

A school of thought of a community based merely on material interest, cannot be really comprehensive or practical. How do communist leaders act in connection with the principles, ideals, mottoes and symbols of their system?

They act as if their system is above everything else, while in fact it is only a means of attaining life's interests. On the basis of materialistic school, their principle is like an architect's plan for a building. There is nothing sacred about a plan, It is only an aid to construction. The best plan is subsidiary to the building for which it is drawn up. The most that can be said of a school of thought is that it is the best plan for a society, but why should the plan itself be considered as something to be worshipped? The plan is for a building, and the building is for me; so why

should I be sacrificed for the plan?

Such a claim is nonsense, and still a system is rarely regarded as only a means for building a society. It is often looked upon as something sacred for which it would be an honor to give up one's life. Its followers may think their claim baseless, yet they will have to inculcate themselves and others with a spirit of sacrifice.

Now let us see what comprise spiritual goals or values. Are they real or only suggestions to deceive simpletons? Why are they considered of much higher worth than material values? What is a value after all? When a person performs a task willingly, it is for a purpose, a purpose which is important to him, whether it is material or spiritual. It means that that purpose has an interest for him, otherwise he would never follow it. It is said that absolute purposelessness or futility is impossible.

From a material viewpoint, it is obvious that I will be drawn to whatever is useful for me and for the continuation of my life; for, I am naturally attached to my life instinctively. The word value can be used for material things, as well as spiritual ones. A physician can have value for me.

So has medicine.

Material things are in reality physical or required for the body; exercise is also needed for the body, though it is not a substance. SO! food and exercise have value for us. Being charitable to others may have no material benefit for the doer; similarly serving society and the next generation may only be good deeds, but what are their values to him who serves?

A person makes a great effort to serve in an educational organization for the sake of the next generation, and receives no profit, and may even lose his time and the possibility of having a higher income, How should we regard this matter spiritually?

Spiritual matters are very important in human life. The question may be asked whether spirituality is confined to the faith in God, or whether it is possible to have no such faith and yet have a number of spiritual values to govern human life.

Sartre in his book on "Genuineness of Man" quotes this sentence of Dostoevsky: "If there were no God, everything would be permissible." This means that goodness and badness, truth and falsehood, treason and service all depend on whether we believe in God or not, If we have no such belief, then there will be no barrier, and everything is allowed. Is this true or not?

There is one thing peculiar to Marxists that, as materialists, they claim that they have nothing to do with spirituality, or humanity, and if they refer to sound humanism, they imply a classless society. According to them men are either sound or deficient, and their defects arise from private ownership of property and socio-economic class differences. Once these differences are removed, human beings return to their previous state of soundness. They believe in no

other perfection for man and no other progress or evolution.

What about recent schools of thought like Sartre's, which are materialistic and yet believe in spiritual values like humanism, and speak of human responsibility? On the one hand they believe man to be free from any divine sovereignty, or rule of nature, and his will does not by any means depend on the past, It is man who builds himself up, not environment, or destiny or God; so he is responsible for himself, Therefore any act chosen and done by him, must be good. In this way he makes himself a model for others to imitate, and to this extent he is responsible for the conduct of others, too.

Now let us see what this responsibility is and what it means, It is a spiritual matter, not a material one, In a materialistic school they may say, a human being has a conscience which answers questions of responsibility If they believed that man has two personalities, an animal one and a human one, when he commits an offence, the former is chastised by the latter, That would be something But they deny the existence of conscience. So, where is the root of responsibility?

In any case they believe in responsibility, and that is a spiritual matter. They say: "I am responsible before mankind and before the next generation. What does that mean? They belong to a materialistic school, and yet they want to build up humanism (or spirituality) and make men submit to it, They cherish this idea, but minus God. Sartre even says: "If God enters all this, then there exists no spirituality, for, the basis of it all is human liberty, and God's presence means lack of liberty, and thus responsibility without liberty of choice is meaningless. Someone may say: "What prevents us from believing in spirituality without belief in God? For, there is a conscience inherent in man 's nature, which enables him to enjoy good deeds, and abhor wicked acts. He performs good deeds not for the sake of material benefits, but simply because he enjoys doing so, as he enjoys knowledge of history or geography etc., the only profit of which for him is a greater awareness. Similarly, ethical matters give him pleasure." Epicurus, the Greek philosopher, supports this idea. Omar Khayyam, too, is said to believe in it. Hence Epicurism was applied later on to every type of pleasure-seeking unconcern. But it is claimed that in his real school, Epicurus also believed in spiritual pleasures which were more lasting and more easily secured. Love of beauty flowers, birds, songs, etc. is another example of pleasure without having any material benefit, but giving the spirit some enjoyment.

All those remarks may be true to some extent, but they involve two limitations. Firstly, man's conscience may not be sufficiently identifiable in depth to provide a basis for a school of thought. If a human being does something only for pleasure, it is only as far as the border of death or successive imprisonment, and within the field of diversion, but not in the form of

profound needs which are identified by a school of thought. No one is ready to give his life for flowers in his garden. He wants to be alive to enjoy them. Helping others gives pleasure, but no one is willing to die for it.

So, it is true that one enjoys good deeds in the depth of his conscience, and the Qur'an, too, recognises this. However, even conscientiousness does not provide a basis for a school of thought. It requires a much deeper faith. So, if someone says that Imam Husain (a) came to Karbala and offered his own life and those of his young followers, as a way of merely satisfying his urge to serve people, this is not a true judgment. This is because he was evidently motivated by not only his conscientiousness, but his deeper faith.

If there is no God and no order of objectiveness, and no intrinsic connection between man and things, should we not say that there is an error in nature? Schoepenhauer says: "Nature, in order to mislead people and send them after its own purpose, offers them pleasures." For example, nature desires the survival of creatures. If it orders a man to marry and work to support his wife and children, an intelligent man would not do so. But nature deceives him in such a way that he willingly seeks marriage. In any case every pleasure is based on a need. We eat because our nature requires that substance, and drink and sleep for a similar reason. If we had no need, we would not resort to them.

The reason for material enjoyments is clear, but what about spiritual pleasures? If I watch an orphan feed, why should I be pleased? It has nothing to do with me, and so this pleasure is futile, for, there is no basic wisdom in it. But if we believe in an inter-relationship in world order and in a creation based on wisdom, then we consider all human beings as fellow-members of a single community, who seek the pleasure of witnessing others' wellbeing. This is so because we follow a true principle in creation. But if this pleasure is accidental and only due to one's natural make-up, again it would be futile, since it lacks a natural objective. Therefore, while we believe in a moral conscience and claim that men naturally benefit by good deeds and lose by evil ones, again our actions would be futile without a belief in God and in the goal of creation.

When we believe in a moral conscience granted by God to man to attain a goal, then an orphan and an old woman and myself will be considered fellow-members of an organization and parts of a general plan. Thus, we follow a divine will and wisdom and try to attain that goal. Then nothing is futile and everything is real and true.

Therefore every school of thought and every social system needs a number of spiritual ideas; an ideology which is above material values, and is so strong that it becomes sacred. This sacredness may be considered worthy enough by a man to sacrifice his personal life for it.

A school of thought, such as indicated above, is reminiscent of the poet Sa'di :

"The wind and clouds, the sun and the and firmaments are all busy working, So that you may
gain a livelihood, and not spend it in negligence,"

It believes in a responsibility for every created thing. Or, as the Qur'an says (31:20): "Do you not
see that God tamed for you everything on the earth and in heaven?" Thus, each thing in
creation is meant for a purpose, and it performs its task accordingly.

Therefore, man, too, has a responsibility, in an ocean of responsibilities. But a system which
considers things to be without an ultimate goal, believes in no responsibility for any creature,
but confines it to man. Why this should be so, is not explained.

Ideals are fundamental for every school of thought, in order to give an individual, as well as
society, something to work for. And, these ideals are meaningless without a belief in the
.Creator and His Wisdom manifest in the Creation