



Human Values: The Key to Solving Global Problems

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ABSTRACT: At the dawn of global civil society, the test for humanity is to achieve unity while preserving cultural differences as well as the distinctiveness of nations and peoples. Such unity can be reached only by recognizing human values, especially human rights. However, these rights must be strictly determined and more than mere obligations. Hence, the most important task for philosophy is to develop foundations and principles for a world society and to formulate a global consciousness and a humanistic worldview that adequately reflects the realities of our epoch. Our action must increasingly be based on an acknowledgment of global values.

The twentieth century and the United States are synonymous with achievements in the spheres of science and technology along with the attendant positive and negative circumstances arising from these developments. Not surprisingly, therefore, when philosophers from all over the world gathered in Boston in August 1998 for the 20th World Congress of Philosophy to discuss the most important contemporary problems the majority of these problems were bound up with the revolution in the spheres of science and technology. Since morality is closely intertwined with social and technological achievements, I want to underline the necessity of moral reevaluation and the need to be flexible and tolerant concerning value orientations if we wish to avoid global instability.

Undoubtedly, contemporary global problems find their roots in the consequences of scientific and technological progress. The most important of these problems are the threat of global nuclear war, ecological imbalance, unsustainable population growth, and a growing developmental gap in the socio-economic conditions among countries intertwined in this unprecedented global economy. Yet, the reason for many of these problems is pedagogical because only through education (which facilitates a realization of our role in the existence of global problems) does the human race have a chance to minimize, if not eliminate, the negative consequences of science and technology.

Despite constant efforts and urgent attempts to overcome these global problems the best we have are only some moderate results. Important decisions have not been made and important actions have not been taken. Serious reasons exist to think we are proceeding in the wrong direction in trying to find solutions. Our efforts aim to influence effects, not causes. As a result, we disclose new unintended problems even as we overcome some difficulties. And like a person trying to remove weeds by their leaves without removing their roots we go on wondering why the weeds continue to grow thicker and richer. So to seek the roots of our global problems one should first attempt an active beginning. This

beginning should start with the human condition including relations with others and the environment.

In the last decade, science and technology have abruptly changed the human condition. Prior to the twentieth century, a nation's habits, norms, values, and social relations tended to be resistant to external influences and to be conservative in character. Under the pressures of science and technology, especially influencing a nation's economy, the modern world began transforming into our more global contemporary world. As this transformation continues, every aspect of the human condition alters. For example, transnational corporations turn the sphere of trade among countries into a global common market. Communication advances create a common space of information (which increases the speed while decreasing the time for social relations). Alterations in our spiritual life, also, go hand-in-hand with these changes in culture, science, and politics. Thus, all of these transformations which influence our human condition create a smaller planet in which people become more interdependent.

This context of rapid transformations helps to explain the recent changes in Central and Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union. Closed societies (to use a term of Karl Popper) and totalitarian regimes strive for self-isolation. Such isolationist policies attempt to remove a country and its people from global interdependence. However, as the Soviet Union's disintegration exemplifies, the open societies of the West turn out to be in a more favorable position to derive benefits (not the least political stability) from the transformations associated with the advances in science and technology.

Despite the pressures of global interdependency (which impels social, political, and economic change), the world remains divided into highly developed and underdeveloped nations with the gap between these two groups ever-widening. Only one billion (called a golden billion) among the six billion inhabitants of our planet currently live in conditions which sustain, promote, and guarantee quality of life. The majority of our planet's inhabitants live in poverty and see no prospects for themselves.

Thus, at the same time that an integrated world community is forming with a common abode, a common fate, and a common responsibility for everything that takes place in the world, the realization comes that no one can escape participating and sharing in the responsibility for discussing and attempting to overcome our common problems. Such problems will become more aggravated if the world continues to be divided by nationalistic policies which encourage a continual widening of standards of living among various populations. This situation of ever-perpetuating socio-economic inequality is a serious barrier to the interrelating of diverse populations globally. Can such an interdependent society become a reality? Can the ideal of a world community be transformed from an ideal into an actual open society? The answers to these questions are not obvious at all.

Our contemporary world still represents a mixed picture of sovereign national states. Some of them are rich and successful. The majority lag hopelessly behind in their socio-economic development. All of them undertake immense efforts defending their national sovereignty and carrying out politics exclusively on the basis of national interests. Such a nationalistic approach is unacceptable in our new context, when acknowledgement of global interdependency and the maintaining of a balance in social and environmental relations become the most important conditions for the advancement and survival of human beings.

In other words, our given circumstances leave us no choice but to seek to achieve a coordination of our actions, a unity in our aims, and an overcoming of the nationalistic separatism in our world. A necessary consideration, in overcoming such nationalism, is the recognition and acceptance of the diversity of cultural traditions which currently exist in various nations and among people. Although the contemporary transformations wrought by

science and technology implicitly prescribe a recognition of and respect for diversity (which in earlier times was ignored), this prescription is extremely difficult to accomplish because the socio-economic and political stability currently existing is based on an international economic interdependence which is supported by military complexes. By having military armaments as the foundation for international interdependence humanity is put on the brink of an impending disaster.

However, imposing a value system (which respects diversity) on the basis of force or decree is unthinkable. Only two ways exist of regulating social relations in a civilized manner--by morality and by law. Yet moral development and legal processes take time to develop and renew slowly. Moreover, people need to respond now while they have time. We should not nourish illusions that we can guarantee our security by only banning and/or eliminating the proliferation and use of our nuclear arsenals. While such acts are necessary steps, they are insufficient to removing us from our dangerous situation.

People live not only in a nuclear century, but in an epoch which poses numerous possibilities and means by which we may eliminate ourselves on a global basis. For example, the destruction of the ozone layer of the planet's atmosphere, the possibility of chemical or biological warfare or terrorism, and the destruction/meltdown of nuclear power stations offer similar fates as nuclear warfare. Of course, we should continue to promote the elimination of nuclear weapons, but people must recognize that no comprehensive solution exists, and hence there is no secure future for humanity.

Although knowledge of these techniques may not be eliminated (because we still depend on science and technology for our survival), the primary effort of people should be directed away from destroying each other (militarily and especially socio-economically) and our environment and toward the creation of moral, just, peaceful, and sustainable social and environmental relations. In order to reach these goal, we need to reinterpret and reevaluate ourselves and our world and alter our behavior and value orientations. Human values must reflect the idea that all of us live as one large family on one small earth. We have no where to go and cannot change this awful aspect of our existence.

What we can and must do is reevaluate our values, promote a global oriented morality, and implement appropriate international laws. In this case, human rights legislation becomes of utmost importance. Yet prior to such legislation is the necessity that everyone receive an education which facilitates an understanding of our current global situation along with a respectful appreciation for diversity and otherness. All human beings must recognize themselves as inhabitants of one world and act accordingly. Hence, all nation-states, despite their traditions, beliefs, and values, are obligated to give priority to the common interests of human beings in order to preserve all life on earth. No one can with certainty forecast the fate of humanity or of our planet. But the degree to which we are able to influence conditions of life on our planet requires each of us to acknowledge global values and our responsibility for acting on such values.