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Abstract
Extract:
One way of characterising the history of civilisation's progress since the emergence of private property is as a history of conflict between unbridled self-interest and social ethics. So far as economic or material progress alone is concerned, self-interest (emanating from the animal instinct for self preservation) has been the dominant force. Given that material progress is meaningful for the human race as a whole only when it is subservient to social ethics, it is disconcerting to note that, in reality, what economic development has brought about seems quite the other way around.

Keywords
Human values, social ethics, Nature, Western

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Material Progress and Ethics: A Pilgrimage Through Time

by Ratan Lal Basu[1]

One way of characterising the history of civilisation since the emergence of private property is as a history of conflict between unbridled self-interest and social ethics. So far as economic or material progress alone is concerned, self-interest (emanating from the animal instinct for self preservation) has been the dominant force. Given that material progress is meaningful for the human race as a whole only when it is subservient to social ethics, it is disconcerting to note that, in reality, what economic development has brought about seems quite the other way around. With material progress, the driving force of self-interest, with all its damaging manifestations, has very often set at naught human values and social ethics. But humanity - languishing in the narrow grooves of self-interest - has sought strength through revival of the countervailing force of ethics.

Why does self-interest appear to obtain supremacy during periods of rapid economic progress? Firstly, the blind law of Nature may be said to play a central role in the self preservation of the individual vis-à-vis the external world (Lehninger, 1987). This law of Nature manifests through continuous change (Eddington, 1930; Engels, 1975): every component of the universe is moving and transforming. The blind law of Nature knows no ‘good’ or ‘bad’, it has no mercy, no compassion. It does not matter to Nature if the entire universe is devoid of any living beings, or even if it is compressed into an infinitesimal ‘black hole’ (see Hawking, 1993). ‘Good’, ‘bad’, ‘beneficial’, ‘harmful’ and all similar terms are only linguistic expressions to indicate the way something affects the existence or advancement an individual, an institution or humanity as a whole. The only beneficial aspect of the law of Nature from the standpoint of living beings is the endowment of the instinct of self preservation and self duplication. This driving force of self interest, the droplet of the law of Nature ingrained in the genetic code, became the conscious self preservation instinct in the individual in the course of millions of years of evolution, necessitated by the interaction with Nature itself as environment. However, from the very womb of the instinct of self interest emerged the forces of symbiosis and cooperation, the rudimentary form of fellow feeling and ethics, developing over time as the social ethics of primitive societies living in communistic clans (Morgan, 1980; and Engels, 1972).

As a consequence of conflict with Nature, and the conscious efforts of the individual (facilitated by a highly developed self-reflecting central nervous system) to learn the laws of Nature and apply them to fight inimical forces of Nature, there emerged the process of production, a new form of means (different from the slow and wasteful process of genetic adaptation), for adaptation to circumstances created by the dynamic forces of the environment. The process of biological adaptation was, in the human being, overshadowed by conscious adaptation of the social forces of production. This process necessitated humans grouping together, to struggle together. The common threat and challenge of Nature generated the ethical forces of fellow feeling and mutual love of the tribespeople. But these ethics were applicable strictly for the members of one’s own tribe alone. Hatred for those belonging to other tribes, especially in the case of conflict over limited resources for survival, was the counterpart of love for one’s own tribe. Self interest became subservient to ethics simply because of helplessness of each of the tribe vis-à-vis Nature and as communal association through mutual love and fellow feeling was the only means to protect the individual’s existence. This presupposes the following conditions (Morgan, 1980):

1. undeveloped forces of production;
2. scarcity of means of subsistence; and

3. no division of labour, no surplus and, therefore, no private property.

This condition persisted up to the lower stage of barbarism. But with the improvement in the forces of production, emergence of division of labour and surplus produce and the consequent emergence of private property, it was possible for a few (advanced in physical strength, intellect or cunning) to obtain the help of the community to combat Nature - not by fellow feeling and ethics but by establishing command over others through the ownership of the means of production. This initiated the decline of ethical values and ascendancy of the force of brutal self-interest.

Division of Labour and Decline of Ethical Values

Because of suitable conditions in Europe and Asia, advancement of metallurgy - particularly discovery of iron - resulted in rapid advancement in cultivation, water transport and domestication of animals. Social division of labour emerged, leading to the vast increase in production and emergence of surplus over and above subsistence. This material progress had its regress in degradation of ethical values and fellow feeling of the communistic clan societies. Accumulation of private property in land, commodities, implements of production and slave labour gave birth to the era of exploitation of one person by another.

But the social ethics of humanity were not altogether lost. The protesting voice of ethical sensibility, though almost inaudible, could however be heard out of the din and bustle of self-interest.

The Old Testament and the Protesting Voice of Social Ethics

In Israel, the degradation of human values brought about by material progress, unrestrained proliferation of jealousy, mutual hatred, and exploitation, invited protests from the Hebrew prophets. In the face of the rapid strides of the demon of self-interest, uncontrollable by historically evolved customs, social ethics or even fear of divine punishment, the prophets appeared helpless. They could devise no means to bring people back once again onto the path of virtue, fellow feeling and ethics, and ultimately sought remedy in destruction of the world by divine vengeance (The Old Testament of the Bible, especially ‘Isaiah’).

Socrates and the Triumph of Ethics

After the defeat of the Persians in the Battle of Marathon (490 BC), Greek civilisation, which evolved in isolated islands in the course of the previous 2000 years, achieved a highly developed form in the city-state of Athens (Hooker, 1993). With international commerce based on a developed agricultural hinterland, sophisticated domestic industries and a democratic government, all branches of knowledge and art flourished, Hellenistic culture, enriched by advancement in the fields of science, mathematics, philosophy, literature, painting, sculpture and other areas became an everlasting source of inspiration for all human art and culture of the future. But the coin had its other side too. Athenian democracy based on slavery (over half the inhabitants were slaves), despite all the aforementioned achievements, began to reveal vices associated with unbridled individualism and supremacy of the blind instinct of self-interest. As a consequence of the spread of the scientific outlook and the teachings of the Sophists, fear of the deities of Olympus could no longer hold reckless self interest in check (Finley, 1980). At this critical juncture emerged Socrates, the embodiment of human social ethics. Despite his death sentence for violating the narrow social mores of the time, his teachings became immortal, erecting an invincible fortress for the survival of ethics (Durant, 1965).

The Christic Message of Universal Love

The flame of Greek civilisation burning timorously after the fall of Athens, was extinguished

completely after the death of the Macedonian king, Alexander the Great. The torch of Western civilisation being handed over to Rome, the scene now shifted to the mainland of Europe. Roman civilisation, with its developed agricultural economy was characterised by wars and conquests, canon laws based on unrestrained right to private property, unbridled individualism, oppression of the poor and striking inequalities in income distribution. Gradually, impersonal 'money' became the supreme controlling force of society. Money which emerged out of the necessity for exchange (a *sine qua non* for the existence of the division of labour) and the difficulties of direct barter, became the master and the human being its slave. Nature once again struck back in reply to humankind's endeavour to control it by forces of production.

In such a merciless state of affairs social ethics revolted through Jesus Christ, as a living manifestation of ethics, emerging from among the oppressed classes - slaves, fisherfolk, peasants and artisans. His challenge to the established order was met, as in the case of Socrates, with the death sentence, which Christ accepted, converting the vitriol of hatred into an ideology of universal love - one which was to endure in the Western world unto the present day of the third millennium of his message. The world, once again, became a place worthy to live in.

Commercial Capitalism and Spinoza

A rapid succession of invasions by the Germanic tribes for over a century since the late 4th century AD converted the Roman Empire into a battlefield destroying its economic achievements. Out of the relics of the Roman Empire emerged the feudal system, all landed property being appropriated and divided among them by a few barons and feudal lords. The large manorial estates were preserved by the law of primogeniture. Feudalism, based on serf labour, ushered in the economically stagnant Middle Ages. In England, the conflict between the king and the feudal lords, which emerged during the reign of Henry II (1154-1189 AD), became a significant force in shaping subsequent developments. Richard I, badly in need of money after the expensive third Crusade (1189-92), started granting a charter of freedom to the burghers of the towns in exchange for a fixed rent per year, to be paid collectively by the community of each chartered town. Burghers, now emancipated from the shackles of the feudal lords, began to take the initiative in the development of domestic industries, internal commerce and foreign trade. With the initiative of the burghers and active encouragement from the king, who found an ally in the burghers against the disloyal feudal lords, trade and commerce began to flourish. Hence the forces of material progress, after centuries of stagnation, began to assume momentum.

Besides England, the Italian cities of Venice, Genoa and Pisa acquired so much power and progress as to become independent, democratic city-states, thus preparing the ground for the Renaissance that brought about a metamorphosis in the social and cultural profile of Western Europe. The history of classical civilisation was repeated, but this time within a framework suitable to contemporary needs and across a wider geographical area of Europe. Indeed, the Netherlands emerged with advanced international trade. Ultimately, however, the engine of growth shifted to England. During the 16th century, the chartered monopolistic trading companies (for example, Merchant Adventurers, Levant, Muscovy, Eastland, and East India) could establish incontestable British supremacy in international trade and brought about revolutionary changes in transport, banking, agriculture and social institutions and outlook.

Rapid material advancement was matched by regress in ethics and values - the commercial world outlook shattering ethical values inherited from the Germanic nomads. Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), the great philosopher of Jewish origin, thrown into a secluded corner of the Dutch city of the Hague because of his ant-establishment views, wrote his masterpiece, *Ethics*. A harmonious assimilation of the universal love of Buddha and Christ as well as the wisdom of Socrates, Spinoza's philosophy influenced the thought of European philosophers, poets, novelists and philanthropists for the following century or more.

Industrial Capitalism and Robert Owen's Utopian Socialism

During the second half of the 18th century, a series of innovations in British cotton textiles industry ushered in the era of the Industrial Revolution. This marked the transition from commercial capitalism to industrial capitalism, characterised by production in factories away from labourers' houses, dependence on wage labour and use of machinery run by stream and other non-animal sources of power. Profit and money-making became the dominant motive of production. Social relations were now viewed in terms of exchange; even labour power became a simple exchangeable commodity devoid of all human connotations.

During the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent capitalistic system spread to France, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and other West European nations, USA, Canada, Japan and parts of Czarist Russia. Among these limited number of industrialised nations, comprising only a minority of the world population, emerged colonisers who divided the rest of the world among them as sources of cheap raw materials and protect markets for industrial output (Southgate, 1965a, 1965b; Lenin, 1975a; and Naoroji, 1901).

The spectacular advancement in methods of production seemed to obey Newton's 'Third Law' by generating equal opposite and repressive forces in the sphere of social ethics. Unlimited possibilities of self advancement and acquisition of wealth and power set the demon of self interest free from the bondage of ethics, fellow feeling and conscience. Wanton exploitation of colonies by the industrialised nations, inhuman exploitation of labour by the capitalists within industrialised nations, disintegration of values within bourgeois families - characterised by commercialisation of family relations and oppression women and children, besmirched prior achievements in science, technology and material advancement.

Reaction came from the German Romantics and socialist thinkers. Burke, Gentz and some Romantics in Germany desired to go back to the pre-capitalist era as an escape from the evils of capitalism (Roll, 1993: 178-226). Socialists like Sismondi and Proudhon in France sought the solution in socialistic control of unrestrained individualism. The state's significance, which was embryonic in the analysis of Adam Smith, assumed overwhelming importance at the hands of the socialistic writers. Various models of socialism were theoretically designed an alternative to capitalism. The name of Robert Owen of England calls for specific mention for his honesty, sacrifice and love for suffering humanity. All his experiments with theoretically designed Communism met with failure but remained a source of inspiration for future philanthropic endeavours.

Karl Marx and His Utopia

The most comprehensive theoretical model for the alternative to capitalism was constructed by Marx and Engels. They branded historically achieved ethical values as the tricks of the oppressors to subdue the oppressed. They denied the significance of historically achieved exchange, market mechanisms, and the family system. Instead, they constructed their new world-system on the basis of their theoretically designed ethics and abolition of hitherto existing ethics, family relations, the exchange mechanism and private property. For the ultimate achievement of stateless communism, socialism based on the dictatorship of the proletariat, was to be achieved first by overthrowing the capitalist states through proletarian revolution (Marx and Engels, 1975; Marx, 1978; Lenin, 1975b; Mao Tse Tung, 1970; and Stalin, 1970). Theories are but abstractions to understand the empirical world. But to create a new world on the basis of artificially contrived theories is sheer fantasy. So, notwithstanding the honesty and sincerity of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao; notwithstanding the structural beauty and consistency of the Marxian model as such, the socialist states that emerged since the Russian Revolution of 1917 came up against insurmountable barriers. This was largely because the proletarian philosophy of brotherhood or comradeship (which emerged out of oppression of labour by capital) vanished through its 'advanced detachment' (use of the term in Stalin, 1970, Chapter III, IV) as soon as it was put to state power. The fantasy of a state planning system without a market mechanism proved to be of little utility. Conflict with reality compelled the socialist states to move away from rigid Marxist ideology (Dobb, 1966; Muquao, 1981; Alley, 1973; Mackerras, Taneja and Young, 1993). Ultimately, most of the socialist states crumbled.

In a similar way, the fanciful world of neo-classical economists, to be built on the basis of 'perfect competition' and 'laissez faire' could hardly be realised. 'Keynesian economics', emerging out of the experiences of the devastation of the Great Depression of the 1930s, intensified the process of state control in the so-called freemarket economies (Friedman, 1980).

So, in the present world, we are left with neither socialism nor capitalism in their theoretically contrived purity. That which we have today are 'mixed economies' with varied proportions of private sector and social control, plus a surging presence of global markets in what has come to be known as the globalisation system of the post Cold War era.

Globalisation into the 21st Century and the Prognosis for Ethics

While scientific progress has reached phenomenal heights, pride vanishes the moment we look at the ethical components of the materially advanced world. One need only reflect on the prodigious armaments industry to realise how high levels of technology are not necessarily at the service of human betterment (see Saul 1992). While on the one hand, the impact of globalisation is forcing vulnerable states to become more 'transparent' in their political and economic habits (hence potentially relieving the stresses of 'crony capitalism' and undemocratic practices), on the other, individual efforts are also required to maintain an ethical universe. There are signs that this is unfolding in the environmental and human rights domains. For the vast majority of the underprivileged of this world, the international institutions and NGOs need to work harder. Consciousness of the problem of social ethics on a global basis is, however, being raised. The world may yet be a worthy place to live in.

Footnote

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