

REVIEW ARTICLE

Humans as “Between Beneath, Before and Beyond”

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Who am I? What do I know? What can I hope for? In answering these profound questions, the above two quotes can remind us of the human being’s transcending nature. The French mathematician and philosopher, Blaise Pascal said: “Man infinitely transcends man.” Another French thinker Albert Camus claimed, “Man is the only creature that refuses to be what he is.”

One quote expresses that transcending nature positively and the other negatively. Humans are unique since in the very process of understanding and answering fundamental questions about ourselves, we are drawn into the question still more. This book is a modest attempt to understand the human nature with a view to fulfilling our human potential to the fullest.

This book by philosopher-scientist, Prof Kuruvilla Pandikattu, explores the ever evasive nature of the human being. It is divided into three broad parts. The first part, Human Fecundity, deals with the positive or the creative dimensions of human existence, which enables a person to create meaning and enhance significance in her or his life. The second part, Human Frailty, delves into the frictional and tensional aspects of existence. Here we encounter the challenging dimension of our existence. The third part,

The Human Fallibility, treats the fragile dimensions of human encounter, dealing with our actual brokenness and vulnerability. Together, the three parts throw further light onto the seemingly endless creative, tensional and paradoxical aspects of ourselves. Finally, the concluding section muses on the human yearning for authenticity and reflects on the tensional or creative aspects of human nature, and thereby justifies the title, “Between Beneath, Before and Beyond.”

Part I. Human Fecundity: Fertile Experience

Part I focuses on the human capacity to interpret experiences creatively and make meaning out of them. The first chapter in this section attempts to focus on human beings as story-tellers. It is through stories that we as humans understand ourselves, and history reveals stories are the best means of reflecting on ourselves. Our story-telling has more than entertainment value. It provides us with a way of life with which we are so fascinated. On that note, this chapter also criticises some of the present story that we live, and offers suggestion for another more creative and viable story, of which will enable us to better live our lives. This chapter, then, is an invitation for us to be story-tellers, and open to the creative and narrative part of our human nature.

The second chapter in Part I takes up a related narrative issue, the subject of myths, and how they shape human culture. Myths provide meaning and significance to our lives, in that they frame them in a larger picture. Existential and archaeological myths are means by which humans try to reconcile the paradoxical dimensions of life. Since myths enable us to live the reality of contradictions meaningfully, by giving us ideals to live by, myths may be considered as more classical and elaborate stories. Based on Michael Ende’s classical and popular novel, *Momo*, this chapter helps us to appreciate the mythical dimension of our lives, and enables us to overcome evil and to essentially make human life goal-oriented or directional. It is in this chapter, that we study human beings as myth-makers.

The aim of the third chapter in Part I is to appreciate the role that imagination (or creative dream) plays in the very understanding of ourselves and God. Viewed from this perspective, we can say that imagination is crucial to our self-understanding. Because we can dream and imagine, we are able to create a world about which we can debate. It is this human capacity that permits us to enlarge or widen our life horizons. Thus, imagination provides us with the potential to make our experiences fertile and our world creative. Human beings, then, are creative dreamers.

The final, chapter of Part I studies the aesthetic experience of human beings. It looks at the human person as a seer or an artist. Following Paul Ricoeur's methodology, this chapter will first deal with the singular nature of the beautiful. Then, it will reflect on the symbolic and hermeneutic function of art and its significance, including music. Finally, there will be a discussion on art as it relates to ethics, in other words, the artist in relation to the artisan. That is to say, with reference to works of art, the artist plays a role in making the world aesthetically and morally better. That role indicates the symbolic and humanizing nature of art leading to human fecundity.

To summarise, Part I works with the fertile and creative dimensions of human experience. Those fertile and creative dimensions enable us as humans to make sense of our diverse experiences and evolve further our creative ability.

Part II. Human Frailty: Frictional Existence

Following the discussion on the human creative dimension, Part II treats the frail and frictional aspects of our human life-experience. It takes seriously the broken, fragile and vulnerable dimensions of our human nature. It takes up significant human issues like freedom, development, capability, poverty, suspicion and trust, all of which make our every-day-life feeble and delicate.

The first chapter in Part II studies the unique human capacity for freedom in terms of the finite self, and opening oneself to the infinite. Using Paul Ricoeur's phenomenology of fallibility

and freedom, this chapter relates freedom to the finite human capacity to reach out to the infinite. We as humans experience our freedom as both limiting and enabling. We remain always open to the infinite and yet are rooted in or bound to the finite. The swing, or the tension, between the two poles – bound finitude and unbound infinity – makes humans the unique creatures that we are. It is in this unique “in-between-ness” that we can situate and understand our own freedom. By doing that, we situate humans as in perpetual tension.

The second chapter in this section treats freedom from the categories of capabilities. It examines the first Nobel Laureate’s, Amartya Sen, understanding of poverty as lack of freedom, which in turn helps to appreciate Sen’s notion of development as freedom. This understanding demands us to apprehend freedom as going beyond unfreedoms, and making ourselves capable of approaching well-being. Then, at the philosophical level, and borrowing from Ricoeur, this chapter presents an analysis of the crucial human fallibility, and relates it to freedom and various forms of unfreedom. Finally, from an anthropological point of view, we study Sen’s and Ricoeur’s suggestion that creative discourse could be a means by which to befriend human frailty and cultivate freedom both as a means to human realisation and end in itself. In summary, this chapter exposes us to the dilemma of being human.

The dilemma of being human is studied further in the third chapter, which tries to appraise the human situation hermeneutically. Following Ricoeur’s treatment, the final chapter of Part II traces the long hermeneutic journey from suspicion to trust. Doing this enables one to appreciate the self in terms oneself and the other. With reference to humans’ historical conditioning of our own growth, this chapter focuses on the bodiliness of human experience and the ethical importance of human existence. It may be noted that one leads to the other. In this sense, we are “care concerned of the other.” Each one of us cared for and are called to care for each other. So, it follows, humans are seen as the bounded openness

moving from suspicion to trust and from oneself to the other. It is by maintaining this movement that we realise ourselves.

Part III. Human Fallibility: Fragile Encounter

Part III takes up the tragic dimension of the precarious human existence. This final part of the book delves into the fallible and violent aspects of the human heart and society. This discussion leads to an opening of sorts. In that opening lives a realistic hope, an experiencing the “joy of Yes despite the sadness of the finite.” That “joy of Yes” affirms, unconditionally and unequivocally, our human precarious and precious life.

The first chapter deals with the theme of violence and sinfulness. Without attempting to give a philosophical analysis of the origin of sin and evil, what is presented are some of the dynamics at work in the emergence of evil. What is discussed is based mostly on Paul Ricoeur’s and Ernest Becker’s work. Ricoeur points out that the disproportion that characterizes human beings makes evil possible, though not always. Such a disproportion opens the way to sin and evil. The natural progress from *bios* to *logos* has enhanced human life greatly and caused an evil force to develop an enlarged horizon. With reference to evil, Becker’s work showed the psychological dynamics at work, whereby evil multiplies itself in the very attempt to eliminate it. Both Ricoeur and Becker trace the existence of evil (and also goodness and freedom) to the disproportion or in-betweenness in the human condition. This chapter, to summarise, is a phenomenological description of the emergence and progress of moral evil in individual human beings and human society.

The treatments of violence leads to the second chapter and its predominant theme, which is to attempt forgiveness. Based on the insights of Ricoeur, this chapter reflects on the depth of fault and the possibility of forgiveness both at the theoretical and at existential level of human beings. Individual history is contrasted to the collective history of a community. At the individual level, humans can speak meaningfully of a “happy memory”, but for

a community such a “happy memory” does not always exist. That discussion naturally leads to topic of the act of genuine forgiveness (both at the collective and individual levels) to the art of creative forgetfulness. Such an approach hopefully provides useful insights for dialogue between and reconciliation of cultures, without which humanity cannot survive. Thus, the aim of this chapter is not so much to focus on the depth of fault, but to remind ourselves of the travesty of justice that human beings – both as individuals and cultures – are capable of committing. Also, this chapter attempts to encourage an opening of ourselves to the promise and possibility of forgiveness – even forgiveness between cultures, which today’s world so badly needs. It is the capacity of human beings to forgive that gives hope to humanity. Such a hope is taken further in the next chapter, which focuses on the human ability to reach out to others and nature.

The third chapter of Part III takes up the issue of prayer from phenomenological and a-religious perspectives. In this chapter on spiritual exercise and experience, the agonies and ecstasies faced by the world today are discussed. What is asserted is that the uniqueness and versatility of a spiritual exercise is tested by the actual life situation of the community: how far it promotes life, fosters joy and furthers love. After understanding spirituality primarily as an experience, what is attempted is to situate a meaningful spirituality (and spiritual experience) on our collective and contemporary human experience. Next, then, is a discussion on the human longing and fulfilment that is embedded in every spiritual quest – leading to an appreciation of spiritual exercises as an experience of love conditioned by our context and open to the whole of reality. And it follows that that experience can cause a person to appreciate the uniqueness and versatility of spiritual exercises and experiences, which leads to a renewed vision of God, world and humans. The focal point of our human spirituality, then, is LIFE in its varied forms searching for fullness, which does not negate the debilitating human experiences of sin and evil in our lives.

The concluding chapter looks at humans as “the between, before and beyond.” In the first section of this chapter, using the ordinary alphabets, we try to indicate that language and reality is more than monadic letters. Then, we take up two scientific theories to indicate the inherent connectedness of the whole reality. We also employ another contemporary scientific finding to show us that we do not perceive much of the empirical world, which can help us to be humble in our approach to the larger world. Then in the light of our scientific study, we recognise human beings not as pure entities (“independently subsisting objects”) but as an evolving horizon that is ever becoming. Finally, we dwell briefly on love as relationality constitutive of reality, which is ever enlarging and expanding.

This book, interdisciplinary in character, takes the scientific world seriously and is open to other fields of enquiry. Some scientific data and religious insights from both Christian and Hindu traditions for reflection are used. Since Prof Pandikattu has been specialising on Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), who is widely recognised as one of most distinguished French thinkers of our time, these reflections are heavily inspired by Ricoeur’s insights. So these reflections are not an exploration of Ricoeur’s thought, but based on or inspired by him.

As such, each of these chapters of the book forms an independent unit, and gives its own insight into human nature. Still, the general aim of the book is to trace the common thread running through the chapters and arrive at an evolving, tensional and creative understanding of the human person as poised between the present and the past, between the actual and potential, between good and evil, between freedom and non-freedom, between the real and imagination, and between authenticity and inauthenticity. The goal is to show that it is in maintaining and not denying the tension that we as humans can truly realise ourselves as the ever open horizon.

The title of the book, “Between Before and Beyond,” may need some explanation. Firstly, it refers to the tensional existence

of human beings, in terms of time. We live in the present, always anticipating the future. So we carry the past, in fact all our past experiences, with us. Secondly, it points to the existential longing for more, which is inherent in human beings. Never satisfied with what we have, we yearn for more, and this more is characteristic of our existence. Thirdly, at the philosophical level, we are always one step ahead of ourselves. When an actuality is realised, a new potentiality emerges, inviting us to transcend ourselves. It is in this “already and not yet” that we exist. We are the horizon that is ever elusive: ever receding and inviting at the same time. We are ourselves transcendence –open to The Beyond – and we remains always limited!

Throughout the discussion Prof Kuruvilla Pandikattu has been trying to see the inherent creative tension that is present in human persons. This creative tension enables humans to be ever open to the new horizon of possibilities.

The tension between the past and the future is only one of the creative paradoxes that we are exposed to. In this book, we first talked of the richness of human experience in terms of fertile experience. That human beings can come up with creative stories and myths in experiencing, encountering and articulating the world indicates the power of imagination that is intrinsic to us.

We then addressed the frail and frictional aspects of human existence in terms of the tension between finite actualities and infinite possibilities (freedom). Next, we dwelt on the participative dilemma involved in human development that is both material and spiritual. After that we studied the tensions between a hermeneutics of trust and suspicion, between time (temporality) and history that gives us identity.

In the third part of the book, we dealt with the fragile and fallible human experiences of sin, forgiveness and redemption (through prayer). The experience of sin and woundedness and healing and wholeness for the whole, make longing a necessary and vulnerable part of being human. Such experiences of forgiveness

and prayer open us to a new and hope filled affirmation of life.

Finally, emphasizing the creatively paradoxical and tensional aspect of human beings, we focused on the human person as the “in-between-ness” — the present carries within itself past experiences and future possibilities. This may sum up the nature of the human being.

Such a predicament or “between-ness” surrounded by “before” and “beyond” may be also found our tensional and dynamic existence between:

- The past and future (temporal tension)
- now and eternity (temporal tension)
- transcendence and immanence (anthropological tension)
- life and death (“law of life”)
- verb and noun (the linguistic level)
- here and there (spatial tension)
- body and soul (anthropological tension)
- failure and hope (experiential tension)
- joys and sorrows (existential tension)
- memory and forgetfulness (existential tension)

This book is related to two others books which the author is bringing out in the immediate future. The next book “Ever Approachable, Never Attainable,” focuses directly on science-religion dialogue and “Gratefully and Gracefully,” focussed on human dying, another area of author’s specialisation. In all the three volumes, he has been using scientific and religious insights critically and creatively contributing to science-religion dialogue.

Pandikattu, Kuruvilla. *Between Beneath, Before and Beyond An Exploration of the Human Condition Based on Paul Ricoeur*; CreatiVentures, Pune, 2013, p. 276+ x. price Rs. 400. ISBN 9788188360024; ISBN 8188360023.

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