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Embodied, Enabled and Empowered: Struggles in Encountering Virtues and Values according to Cyril Desbruslais

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Abstract: By nature, human being has intrinsic goodness in herself. Throughout the history of humankind, one of the struggles of human being is to live a morally accepted life. In this world of rapid change and technocratic growth, the terms like virtue and value are not a matter of concern. This is a holistic attempt to affirm the basic philosophical certitude of human goodness and inner order achieved by authentic life. It is true that human being experiences struggle in doing so. In fact, human being is a being in and

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through struggle.

By unconditional and non-mutual relationship, human being can take her neighbour to excellence. Then, the hindrances to a life of excellence like those of the existential abnormality, animalism in human nature (*homo hominu lupus* of Thomas Hobbes) selfishness pre-established dualistic ideological tendencies and contradictory human consciousness will wither away.

Keywords: Human struggle, Virtues and Values, Erroneous Conscience, Responsible Choice, Moral Relativism, Natural Law

Yada yada hi dharmasyaglanirbhavatibharata
Abhythanamadharmasyatadatmanamsrijamyaham
Paritrnayasadhunangvinashay cha dushkritam
Dharmasangsthapanarthaysambhabamiyugeyuge

Whenever there is decay of righteousness, O Bharata,
And there is exaltation of unrighteousness, then I
Myself come forth.

For the protection of the good, for the destruction of
evil-doers,
For the sake of firmly establishing righteousness, I am
born from age to age.

”Whenever virtue subsides and wickedness
prevails, I manifest Myself. To establish virtue, to
destroy evil, to save the good I come from Yuga
(age) to Yuga.” Swami Vivekananda’s translation

“You can tell the value of a man by the way he treats his
wife, by the way he treats a subordinate, and by the way
he treats someone who means nothing for him” -Cyril
Desbruslais¹

Introduction

Human being struggles to lead a virtuous life. By nature, human being has intrinsic goodness in himself/herself. Throughout the history of humankind, one of the struggles of human being is to live a morally accepted life. In this world of rapid change and technocratic growth, the terms like virtue and value are not a matter of concern. This is a holistic attempt to affirm the basic philosophical certitude of human goodness and inner order achieved by authentic life. It is true that human being experiences struggle in doing so. In fact, human being is a being in and through struggle.

This short essay is an attempt to reflect the intrinsic goodness of human being as visualised by Dr. Cyril Desbruslais S.J. as a philosopher and educationist who in many ways opened the floodgates of radical thinking in our postmodern world. In contrast to Christianity, Islam believes in human person as a total entity. According to him, human person is neither purely spiritual nor purely physical. His philosophy does not divide the person into body and soul. He would emphasise that we are spiritual-corporeal units, when one part of us hurts, all are hurt. In each case, metaphorically or literally, these images evoke sympathy and intend to modify our behaviour accordingly.

To start with, struggles in encountering values and virtues would take us back to the discussion of the basic human nature and its culture. There is a relentless war between human nature that is constant and human culture that is changing. In philosophy human nature is understood by its essence and existence. According to Phenomenological school of philosophy, human nature by essence is of consciousness, intentionality and meaning-giving system. Whereas Existential philosophers like Sartre, would insist on the existential nature of human being. The interplay between these human nature and culture confronts us with the problem of virtues and values

today. One is inclined to ask how values and virtues can ever be anything but a set of moral beliefs and behaviour that relate to each other. Can we really even imagine a God that announces to its followers, “God exists” as part of its world-view but then recommends that they live as if there were no gods, or God, or makes no recommendation on a pattern of life? Can we really conceive of an ancient Chinese sage who might have said, “The Tao holds the secret of life” but then recommended that people live as if no such thing as the Tao existed?’

1. Historical Analysis of Human Conduct

Albert E. Avey, in his book *Hand Book in the History of Philosophy*,² brings out the deepest interests that underlie the actions of human beings. Human beings evolved, civilization flourished across the globe. Avey is certain that human beings have always thought of the final destiny of individual. The remains of the greatest civilizations like the Egyptian, the Mesopotamia, the Indus, the Mandarin and the Inca reveal this thought as prevalent. For the Egyptians, there is always a connection between the accepted conduct of human life and the final destiny of the individual. Thus, their theology was also concerned with final destiny along with appreciating the Divine Goodness. Every activity of life was expected to be a virtue-centred activity. The same was with the Hebrew ethical conduct. Ethics and moral life have meaning only in relation to the existence of the Divine Being.³

Parallel to these statements, the materialist schools sternly affirmed that ethical conduct does not lead to any metaphysics. There is no need for a divine order or metaphysical postulation to be moral. Life is to be lived here and now. Human being is just being out of material

composition. Nevertheless, pursuing a good life is expected of every human being.

Thus, the historical analysis brings out a certain ideology that at every level of human progress, there was a desire to lead to a morally accepted life to reach the final destiny of human being. At the same time, human being is always choked by the overwhelming struggle to define what is virtue and value. A critical discussion on virtue and value enables the theme to evolve coherently. To explain what virtues and values without trying to grasp the system of meanings it conveys is not unlike trying to explain a computer without mentioning a programme, or a book without referring to words. It cannot be done.

2. A Philosophical Discussion on Virtues and Values

Values and virtues date back to antiquity. It means to say that understanding of virtues and values was that they were co-constitutive. It leads to moral excellence and takes away from depravity. Virtue is something that is excellent at its task. Many philosophers contributed critically for the development of virtue as a central part of the philosophy of morality. For **Socrates**, virtue is a matter of intellectual mastery. Socrates stated that man wishes to lead a virtuous life, but inscribed by struggle. Virtue, according to him, is the mastery of living a human life, but the degree of virtue changes. Therefore, virtue can be traditionally defined as the firm disposition of the soul. Socrates gave virtue an epistemological and anthropological stand, his dictum, “know thyself” as the perfect realization of virtue in life. For knowledge can be gained by human being only when human beings are conscious to sense and in mind.

Plato’s virtue is highly personalised, attainable by the individual who controlled his/her passions and make constructive use of his/her ambition through the exercise of disciplined intelligence. In addition, Plato’s virtue consists of the harmonious interaction of the virtues of self-control,

courage and wisdom, which together constituted the civic virtue of justice. His virtue is confined to philosopher-king alone.

According to Aristotle, "Virtue is a certain kind of habit, a good habit". He made virtue and values a collective term when he said human being is social animal therefore virtue through good habits and actions builds a strong relationship between human being and the nature. In addition he enumerates the human struggle due to corruption, contrary habits, by negligence and laziness. He called them vices. Aristotle said it is possible to know the good and yet to choose contrary to it. Thus there arises the problem of the weakness of will. He gave virtue a metaphysical and ethical framework. The daily life and grounded imperfections stand at the root cause of struggle.

The nineteenth century has taken turn around in approaching moral philosophy and specially the concept of virtue. The existentialist philosophers name virtuous life as life of authenticity. The quest for authenticity becomes especially significant in extreme situations. Kierkegaard, Sartre, Nietzsche and Camus struggle for personal destiny.

For them, a virtuous human being is one who writes his /her own story and navigates his/her life. They attempt to transcend this ethos and attain a personal and subjective pathos, which empowers their individuality as human beings. They embody the contradictions of trying to be outside society's accepted norms.

Thus the discussion on virtue started as an individual affair, at its first philosophical origin with Socrates ran down the centuries and accumulated greater importance. Now, virtue is a sign of co-existence and concerned-

existence with the advent of existentialism. At last, the virtue ethicists interpret virtue as a collective and a societal issue leading to moral perfection. Moral perfection is the logical sequence of the acquisition of virtue. Virtue makes human action moral.

3. Struggle 1: Struggle with Erroneous Conscience

Struggle with the mistaken (erroneous) conscience is an anthropological struggle. It is a struggle that a human person experiences as a human being. Human person struggles with the erroneous conscience due to erroneous perception and uncertainty. An erroneous conscience is one, which is malformed due to various socio-psychological problems. When someone is acting consciously, it is intentional. So, the spontaneity and intentionality judge the actions when human being does something uneven. Unintentional and unconscious abstractions, deductions and generalizations contribute a lot in formatting an erroneous conscience and all other factors flow from these. Knowledge process is blind folded by unjust judgements over the experience and perception. In this way occurs the death of conscience, for one dictates one's own conscience falsely instead of being dictated by the conscience, which works under authentic human reason and will. There exists a tendency to picture reality as it is with perfect proportionality. Thus in doing so, human beings acquire knowledge of facts that one perceives probably but registered in mind erroneously.

Henry Bergson puts forth two distinctive forces that are at work in life. They are social pressure and personal aspiration. Social pressure includes rules, society, and security. Development and growth, freedom and power include the personal aspirations. The social pressures cause closed morality. The phenomenon of closed morality is natural to all.

Human beings are struggling to break out of closed morality to open morality that is characterized by dynamism, progress and creativity. This struggle is an existential virtue and in this lies the path to moral perfection.

The consequences of an erroneous conscience are varied and they lead to fatal destructions, as the wrong data does in a computing machine. The malformation of conscience leads to weak and closed moral behaviour. Public piety and private pleasure as Pope Francis said. This limits human person to a set of rules to be followed making one's life an icon of orthodox conformity. It is reluctant to change, while being conservative and authoritative. (Bishops and parish priests and some theologians) When human being is confined only to a set of rules to epistemological struggle of freedom and choice. (abuse of fellow servants and religious sisters in parishes and institutions yet behave as pious servant of YHWH building the kingdom of God. A prominent theologian drank heavily to the point of death, yet the next day he continues his conservative teaching on the dogmas of the Church).

Talking about erroneous conscience about violence and religion today Cyril Desbruslais would contend that the connection between violence and poverty does really exist in our world and that the phenomenon of globalization increases its explosiveness. Further, he supposes there will be no controversy about the ethical assessment of this fact. However, it is not easy to come to a consensus about solutions to this scandalous situation in practice because effective solutions could require sacrifices from the members of affluent societies. Such renunciation will require strong external pressure on agents of powerful ethical convictions.

Cyril further states that millennial or fundamentalist extremism has raised in many nearly every cultural tradition where there are pronounced inequalities of wealth, power and status. The only way to create a safer world is to ensure that it is more just. He presumes that the state being impoverished supports the tendency to look for comfort within fundamentalist religious movements and therefore strengthens the inclination to violent behaviour.

4. Struggle 2: Blockade of Free and Responsible Choice: Epistemological Struggle

The struggle of free and responsible choice is an epistemological struggle. Epistemological struggle is the struggle that a human person experiences as a **rational being**. It is true that human beings acquire knowledge in varied forms like sense knowledge, inference, comparison, postulation, and so on. All these must help the human beings to arrive at right judgements of the reality. Where proper valid human judgement is lacking, there arises the epistemological struggle. Human beings face the epistemological struggle in the form of the blockade of free and responsible choice.

Human actions presuppose certain degree of freedom and responsibility. When human actions are not inscribed by freedom and responsibility, human beings experience an inner struggle. Blockade of free and responsible choice add fuel to the fire to human struggle.

5. Struggle 3: Subjective Moral Relativism: Struggle with Natural Law

Human being has the knowledge of the natural law by nature. Natural law is the dictate of right reason, which indicates the inclination of rational nature towards its end in the moral level. It is a law inherent in human nature. It guides human beings to moral good. This law is known through right reason. Moral law

is expression of natural law, which is the expression of Eternal Law.

In the post-modern world of globalisation it is evident that different cultures of the world have various moral codes. All these moral codes are good in themselves. However, when compared with those that of other modes of morality, some moral codes may appear contradictory to human nature. This leads to subjective moral relativism. Then human beings judge falsely in their subjective moral relativism that whatever he/she does is morally accepted and valid.

It is true that there are divisions in values and it is fundamental. A wrong understanding of the word 'relativity' would lead one to degrading relativism. One of the concluding statements of a critique of Einstein's theory of relativity says that the theory of relativity does not hold good for the moral principles. Virtues and values may be acquired as per one's own religious requirements and beliefs, because a good and a choice that a human person desires is virtue. Here there is the problem of the subjective relativism and the question of subjective destiny. A member of ISIS (Islamic state of Iraq and Syria) might think that his destiny is by his choice to suffer. In his/her view, he/she is suffering, not that he/she is making others suffer. There comes the blockage of free and responsible choice, in which one's freedom is regulated by his/her religion and other external factors.

Another tension, the conflict between the ends and means is a consequence of moral relativism. Gandhi said the ends cannot justify the means. Even if the end is good, if the means are faulty and corrupt, and end cannot justify the means. It is wrong to use other people as means to end.

Moral perfection is a human spiritual and psychological capacity. Human moral perfection, in its widest sense, is to mean an ideal that satisfies human beings' deepest needs or fulfils his/her being. All these grounded struggles tailor each other and flow into the problem of evil.

6. The Challenge: Based on Desbruslais' Philosophy of Human Person

a. Desire to be the Transcendent

By the fact that human being is the conscious being in the world, he/she is concerned with life in the world. At the same time, there is a desire in human beings to transcend this empirical world. Human being expresses desire to transcend this empirical world is evident in the questions that he asks, and especially very tangibly evident in his *metaphysical anxiety over death and destiny*. For this reason, Cyril would go along with Kant who calls human being a *metaphysical animal*.

In many of his lectures Cyril would insist that human being is a composition of many layers in his essence. Some of the layers are rationality, spirituality, inter-subjectivity, morality, religiosity and so on. These layers are intrinsic to human being. Lack of any of these layers would make human beings deviant and abnormal. Only when all the necessary layers of human existence are present, human beings can be called human persons. Therefore, the layer of religiosity is important in entering into a trans-empirical world. To be a person of religiosity, it is not established that one needs to be part of an organised religion. The nature of religiosity in human being leads him/her to the experience of the transcendent. Therefore, a deep longing for the transcendent paves the way for excellence.

b. Thought-Word-Deed Oriented Existence

According to Cyril, knowledge had an eternal bearing on excellence, thus proposing knowledge as necessary for human existence. Excellence presupposes virtue and moral perfection, as virtue prerequisites knowledge and certainty in action. The ancients describe excellence as the skilful performance for anything. Ancients attributed excellence to virtuous actions.

Excellence is defined as the highest intellectual and moral functioning of a human being. For Greeks excellence was synonymous with virtue, meaning that the effective performance of a thing's proper functions with virtue. Excellence is the ideal towards which humans should strive in order to fulfil their unique capacities of moral deliberation and reasoned action.

Aristotle, almost rebuking his master, believed that excellence was achievable by anyone with sufficient experience and rational judgment. Genuine human excellence consists of being intelligent enough to judge correctly how to do the right thing at the right time in the right place in the right manner, and to do so consistently and deliberately. His excellence was basically a 'mean' - balance, a point of equilibrium between extremes - a mean, yet an extreme, between the vices. For Aristotle, like Plato, excellence is inextricably linked to enlightened citizenry, intending conscious political actions.

c. Being Anonymous

Human excellence lies in being anonymous. Kant's *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* has profound contribution to human excellence. While stressing the concept of duty, the book brings about the idea of anonymity. Kant's specialty of morality is that duty must be performed only for duty's sake. It is to go beyond the

craving for the personal identity. Human beings are guided by the observance of the other human beings. It seems that if one does not identify the actions of the other, there would be no more action or the exercise of the one's own duty. Moreover, life becomes devoid of action. When human duty is performed without any expectation, it becomes the supreme motto of human life. At this point Cyril would go a step ahead to ascertain that when human being tries to grow out of this crave for personal identity, human being is already in the realization of excellence.

Conclusion: Being What a Person Actually Is

Finally, in the words of Cyril, 'a self-realization that persons complete one another culminates the process of excellence'. Being a person is the perfect way to excellence, yet an unending struggle that requires continuous personal effort. A human person by becoming a person, paves the way to excellence and happiness. It is an action-oriented endeavour. Thus what has been said earlier that is to shift from Egoism to Altruism becomes the need of the hour. It is neither neglecting the self nor exaggerating the other; neither renunciation nor pure selflessness; neither suffering nor over exuberance. Egoism is a deficient approach to life. On the other hand, altruism and concern for the welfare of others and nature often results in what is best for oneself and are important parts of the way.

Life is inter-woven with genuine and authentic relationships. The metaphysics of human relationship must help us reflect deeply into the reality of relations and relationships. A clear motto could be, "Be what you are, what a person is, and what a community is" The realization of this motto requires Carl Jung's concept of 'unmasking the self' and the existentialist's notion of 'authentic life'. By unconditional and non-mutual relationship, human being can take his/her neighbour to

excellence. Then, the hindrances to a life of excellence like those of the existential abnormality, animalism in human nature (*homo hominu lupus* of Thomas Hobbes) selfishness pre-established dualistic ideological tendencies and contradictory human consciousness will wither away. Thus human vocation to life is the realization of a project inscribed in all human beings and which must be deciphered, loved and realized make it come true. This process has no end. When the hindrances sprout again, there is a need to go back, repair oneself and continue. The finality of human act has come true in experiencing life as it comes which is the expression of wonder.

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Notes

¹ Collections from the class lectures, 1978, JDV, Pune.

² Avey, Albert E. *Handbook of Philosophy*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970.

³ Avey, *Handbook of Philosophy*., 4.