

Editorial

COVID-19 AND THE CHALLENGES TOWARDS ETHICAL SOCIETIES

The 'Year of COVID-19': this is how 2020 is probably going to be remembered. The pandemic is everywhere, its spread and resulting impact has led to an unprecedented global crisis of health and economy, education and culture, power and politics. For the first time, in the recorded human history, the entire world was put on hold by a common threat, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or faith. We washed our hands, put on face masks, and kept ourselves locked down, and in emergencies took care to keep the physical distance to protect ourselves and others from a virus that we cannot see. The COVID-19 affected most people on planet earth, either directly or indirectly, and the coronavirus and related events in the fields of health, economics, education, politics, and culture dominated public discourse, news cycles, internet searches, etc. in the year 2020.

As we enter into the new year 2021, we have the bad news that other types of deadly viruses are found in different parts of the globe, but also the good news that vaccines are developed in record time and are ready to use. When some start thinking of life after pandemic, 'a return to the normal', others warn that coronavirus and other zoonoses are likely to increase and become endemic; we need to learn to live with them, 'a new normal'. According to Pope Francis, this is a time of 'stoppage', a moment to rethink our priorities and to dream big: "We need to slow down, take stock, and design better ways of living together on this earth" (7).

According to Chema Vera, Oxfam International's Interim Executive Director, "Governments' catastrophic failure to tackle inequality meant the majority of the world's countries were critically ill-equipped to weather the pandemic" (www.oxfam.org). António Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations, while delivering the 2020 Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture, said: "The COVID-19 pandemic has played an important role in highlighting growing inequalities. It exposed the myth that everyone is in the same boat. While we are all floating on the same sea, it's clear that some are in superyachts, while others are clinging to the drifting

debris" (<https://news.un.org>). Life threatening poverty coexists with inconceivable wealth. While Amazon, Facebook, Google and Apple made record profit, 2020 recorded the sharpest decline in per capita income since 1870. While the corona virus does not discriminate, our efforts to prevent and contain it do. For that reason, the pandemic has hit the poorest and most vulnerable in our societies hardest.

The economic devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the already poor harder and millions of people are pushed into poverty, hunger, and death as a result of poor public healthcare, weak social safety nets, and discriminating and labour laws. There is a pandemic of inequality as a result of the "globalization of indifference and the hyperinflation of the individual," (Pope Francis, 34) driven by the lust for profit and power. We need develop consciously global sensitivity and solidarity. What Mahatma Gandhi wrote to a friend, who was tormented by doubts, is helpful at this critical juncture:

I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, try the following expedient: 'Recall the face of the poorest and the most helpless man whom you may have seen and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he be able to gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to *Swaraj* or self-rule for the hungry and also spiritually starved millions of our countrymen?' Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away (*Last Phase*, Vol. II, 65).

Philosophically, this is an important time to think critically and creatively the most fundamental questions on human life and values, our relations to God, fellow human beings and to nature. We are puzzled with the questions on the 'right' thing to do in crises. Though we cannot deal with the problems of life, without science and technology, economics and politics, as Wittgenstein observed, "... even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched" (6.52). They are better addressed by aesthetics, philosophy, ethics, and religion, showing connections among various elements of the complicated forms of human life and wellbeing. Faced with human fragility and vulnerability, we are forced to think ethically

about solidarity and common good. As Michael Sandel said: "The common good is about how we live together in community. It's about the ethical ideals we strive for together, the benefits and burdens we share, the sacrifices we make for one another." We realise that to control the pandemic and to protect lives we must all work together; no one is safe until everyone is safe, and no one could deal with this crisis alone; all of us should work together for the common good. It is a moral tragedy that the Governments spend billions in acquiring military equipment even when the countries struggle to provide food, medical care, and education. Besides COVID19 vaccines we need vaccines against indifferent individualism and the hunger for unlimited pleasure and power.

That something can be done and is economically profitable is not sufficient reason for an individual, corporation, or Government to implement a policy or a project; there are inherent moral rights, duties, and virtues for significant human actions. What economically benefits a few or even maximum benefit to maximum number of people is not enough; one has to individually and collectively protect and promote peace and prosperity for all people and the whole planet. We need to adapt the knowledge, economy, and politics to the needs of the people and planet. Progress and development cannot be restricted to short term material and economic benefits brought by science and technology, enhancing market and military power; it has to take into account peace and prosperity of all people and the whole planet. Only ethical development is sustainable development.

All aspects of human life are inextricably intertwined with each other and none of them are neutral in value. Ethics is indeed the *élan vital* of human life and wellbeing. Ethics is a species-specific variable, and human beings could be rightly called *Homo Ethicus*: All human beings are ethical; only human beings are ethical; and to the extent that human beings are ethical, they are fully human beings. A living human being is not just a bundle of perceptions (empiricism) or thoughts (rationalism) but is an individual actively and critically engaging in varying relations with God, community, and nature. These relations have a constitutive ethical dimension.

The *Journal of Dharma*, in the four issues of Vol. 45 proposed to examine critically and creatively Ethics as a fundamental aspect of any significant aspect of human life and the interrelations between

Ethics and other important aspects of human life. Focussing on the general theme, "Towards Ethical Societies", *Journal of Dharma* examined the hypothesis that all branches of human life are closely related with Ethics – rights, duties, and virtues of individuals and groups. They are impoverished conceptually and practically, and are perilous to humanity, if they are separated from Ethics. In this issue of the *Journal* we focus on "Towards Ethical Societies: Philosophical Investigations."

In the first essay of, "Non-Anthropocentric and Dynamic Vision of Harmony: A New Materialist Perspective" Ji-Yeong Yun deconstructs the static approach to harmony and elucidates its dynamic dimension. The author begins with a critical analysis of Plato's functionalist notion of harmony in the *Republic* and moves to the Aristotelian anthropocentric perspective of harmony in the *Politics*. Through the lens of Latour's new materialism, the author, finally, seeks to redefine harmony as a dynamic process and as material assemblages between humans and non-humans that foster creative tensions and increase the intensity of agency.

Chiedu A. Onyiloha, in "Natural Law and Society: A Christian Perspective," argues that natural law is a body of laws embedded in the order of creation, which provides rationale for the created order including human person both in a state of rationality or spirituality. Natural law lays the key frame for the understanding of the self and other non-human beings in creation. Aristotle developed the concept, and Thomas Aquinas transformed it an ethical theory, from a Christian outlook. The research infers that natural law is useful to societal wellbeing.

In the 21st century, crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and global warming require us to radically change our visions with respect to the ecological world. "Harmony of the Ecosystem from the Lens of Deleuzian Assemblage Theory" by Ji Sun Yun reveals a new horizon of harmony, heralds a non-anthropocentric vision where harmony may be perceived to be a process of the combination, connection, and detachment of various elements of the ecosystem, through the lens of Deleuzian assemblage theory. The arguments re-establish a new ontological framework based on the new materialism proposed by Deleuze, Guattari, and DeLanda and suggest a change in our relationship with the ecological world.

Robert Reed in "Creating Ethical Societies in a Concentratory Universe: Simone Weil's Phenomenological Ethics of Attention" argues that Simone Weil's writings suggest a phenomenological method of particular relevance to investigating ethical questions, from Weil's notion of attention and her hermeneutics of 'reading' the world. Since attention sets aside the self and its personal world, this allows for an ethics of self-abdication (decreation) relatively free of influence by the forces of domination. David Rousset's term "concentratory universe" is introduced to describe the claim, argued by Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, and others, that present-day societies show evidence of an increasing reliance on ways of thinking derived from the Nazi concentration camps. Examples are given of applications of Weil's phenomenological method to the problem of how to recognize signs of potential domination in a concentratory universe.

As the business activity is an integral part of our social life, building an ethical society must include, among others, ensuring the ethical conduct of this activity. It is thought that the profit motive is essentially selfish which thereby contradicts the selfless motive of benevolence. A standard strategy for reconciling these two motives takes the profit motive as a means to perform benevolent acts, which, however, only separates the business act from the ethical one. In the essay, "The Possibility of Ethical Business," Napoleon M. Mabaquiao, Jr. advances an alternative strategy in which said motives occur simultaneously as motives for performing the same act. After demonstrating its possibility through a case involving General Motors, the essay shows how this strategy can be ethically justified using the Kantian moral principle of respect for persons.

Wu Kangzhai, an educator in Ming Dynasty of China (AD 1368-1644), expressed his philosophical thoughts through various literary forms such as poetry and journal. Jun Wang, Hua Li, and Jianfeng Zou in the study "Moral Cultivation by Wu Kangzhai: A Mentalism Pioneer in Ming Dynasty" show Wu's important role in encouraging learning of the 'heart-mind' by Chen Baisha and Wang Yangming. Wu Kangzhai's learning of the 'heart-mind' duality was not only enlightenment and guidance for Wang Yangming's theory, but also inspired literary schools in Ming Dynasty such as the Tang-Song school, the Gongan school, and later the Ming prose. His observation of self-cultivation and subtle inspection of moral development over

the years, parallels the sentimentalism and spiritual writing in the middle and later Ming Dynasty literary works.

"Competition and Harmony: Kato Hiroyuki's Naturalism and Ethics for Modern Japan" by Do-Hyung Kim and Eun-Young Park draw on the limitations of materialistic naturalism and ethical aspects attempted by Kato Hiroyuki in the 19th century Japan. In order to overcome the crisis of Western entry into East Asia in the 19th century, Kato Hiroyuki argued that Japan must achieve the development of a modern country through 'Harmony between People'. When Kato realized that the organism state theory evolving through competition could harm the 'harmony between people' of the modern Japan, he argued that true evolution could only be possible through competition for harmony of community.

Paying homage to all people who sacrificed their lives serving the needy, supported the most vulnerable, suffered the most during the pandemic, and worked for lasting solutions for the wellbeing of all people and whole planet, and sharing the hope that policy makers will take decisions for a sustainable future for all, may I submit this issue of the *Journal of Dharma* on "Towards Ethical Societies: Philosophical Investigations" for your reading and reflection.

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