

The Spiritual and Moral Dimensions of the Politics of Development
Dimensions spirituelles et éthiques des politiques de développement
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Thank you for inviting me to speak with you and thank you too for giving me this wonderful topic to address. It is a subject of great importance for the future of our world and one that I feel compelled to explore and discuss. Perhaps because I see the dark sides of the present approach to development being pursued by the most powerful economies of the world, I worry about how the world will be for our grandchildren and their grandchildren. Will there be any wilderness left to provoke awe and to explore, any challenges to meet which will give a sense of accomplishment, any mysteries to excite imagination, any family life and communities? What will be left of the natural world that will not be over exploited and polluted? What meaning will their lives have? What purpose will they serve?

Today when international political pundits discuss development in the forums of national governments and of international organizations, the discourse centers on economic growth, debt burdens, free trade and foreign direct investment: how to stimulate it, how to develop more efficient markets, how to make countries more competitive, how countries can become players in the global market society. Granted, some international bodies are thinking about improving the material conditions of disadvantaged and indigent people in rich and poor countries, but few if any are discussing the intangible issues of life that should govern and direct these efforts. Such issues include nothing less than the larger meaning and purpose of human life. How each individual's natural gifts can be realized giving a sense of accomplishment and self-worth, and, in so doing, some contribution to the well-being of all. It is these types of questions with intangible answers that must also be addressed if the world is truly going to develop the potential nature has given humankind. Tackling them means addressing the spiritual and moral dimensions of development politics. It demands a different kind of philosophical thinking than is going on presently when world bodies deliberate on progress and millennium goals.

What is meant by spiritual dimension and moral dimensions of development?

This of course is a huge topic, in the time I have with you I can only offer you a sampling of the type of thinking this requires and the questions that this subject raises. First, I will try to define more precisely what is meant by the spiritual and moral dimensions of development, and why it is necessary to consider them. Second, I will investigate the question: If the political discourse were to take up these moral and spiritual considerations, how would they alter present approaches to development? Third and finally, I will address specific moral or ethical dimensions of the politics of development.

Spiritual and moral discourse address the intangible dimensions of being such as intelligence, beauty, and happiness which respond to but are also independent of the physical and material dimensions of life, enabling them to give meaning to the tangible and physical manifestation of life. Spirit has been identified in many African and other cultures as an emanation from the intellect or highest faculty of the mind, and the word spiritual evokes the quest for elevated and refined thoughts and feelings. It also refers to aesthetic qualities mixed with noble moral attributes including beauty, charm, liveliness, mettle, vigor and courage. Introducing a spiritual dimension to the political development discourse would draw attention to measures for improving humanity's mental habitat and for feeding its mind and heart. It draws attention to questions of happiness, serenity, wisdom and purpose in human life. It gives heed to the human spirit whose gifts of grace, dignity and talent crave opportunity for their fullest expressions.

The moral and ethical dimensions of the politics of development are inherently inseparable from the spiritual dimension. The moral and ethical discourse concerns behavior in interpersonal relationships and transactions. Associated with it are concepts such as virtue, compassion, justice and integrity .

Why are they so important today?

Awareness of non material dimensions of life and their essentiality to well being distinguishes humankind from other sentient creatures. Being aware one addresses the

key question that should govern all development policy making: “what is the purpose and meaning of life?” Professor Thomas Odhiambo a Kenyan humanist, biologist and promoter of science led development in Africa, offers that answers to this “mother of all questions” are to be entertained not only by sages, philosophers, and theologians but by all sensitive thinkers whose prime concerns are the mysteries of life, destiny, and existential continuity. Thus even if obscure to modern, political thinking, the path of the human Spirit merits exploration in the manner of the Mariner seeking stars not to reach them but to be guided by them.

Sadly, the modern development paradigm identifies commodity possession and opulence with universal aspirations and equates progress with economic growth, rising levels of consumerism, and extension of markets. Progress in development is typically reported by economists in quantitative terms, that is, in indices registering changes in the production of things, which are observable and measurable. Missing in reports on progress are serious reflections on the happiness of the people, the quality of their life styles, and the material costs of growth in environmental degradation, pollution and exhaustion of resources. [Judging from social statistics on the present epidemic of over-weight ness, obesity and diabetes in the US (symptoms of which are now appearing also in Western Europe), while the people’s stock in material goods is rising their life expectancy and quality of life may be declining.]

If the goals of development are essentially material as they are implied in today’s prevailing paradigm then it would seem that development policies are largely irrelevant to the most fundamental concerns of human life. Without linkages between knowledge and wisdom, or between technological change and the realization of the human spirit, modernization means seeing the world abstractly, objectively, and generally--quantifiably. Science and economy are their own ends, ethics, and moral values. This vision of modernity is bleak, even frightening. Bereft of Spirit and buried in its material ambitions and concerns, humankind is left with the dull duties of tending to its bodily needs and satisfactions: “the ultimate trivialization of humankind and its relegation into a merely animal order.”

Many scholars over the ages have asserted that progress requires integration of both material and spiritual aspirations. For centuries in traditional societies, North, South, East and West during and after the Western Enlightenment, material progress was shepherded by certain beliefs about the universe and human nature that defied rational calculation and generated a slow, albeit inexorable advance to--a higher status of knowledge, culture, and moral estate. This relationship, however, no longer appears in the notion of progress inspiring western models of development. Virtually ignored by the forces of modernization are the non material values and aspirations that give wisdom, beauty, grace, dignity, community and transcendent purpose to human life.

Prophetically in 1978, Albert Tevoedjre, Beninois political scientist, international administrator and politician, presently charged by Kofi Annan, with implementing the millennium project in Africa,¹ observed that to view existence and to plan development through the unending spiral of accumulating goods of questionable worth, which are not essential and require obsessive and perpetual pursuit—that is the height of absurdity. ...Absurd, indeed, is the unrestrained accumulation that ends by becoming a poison in the body of society...wealth, when it means the uncontrolled accumulation of private property, in the long run becomes toxic for society, just as fat is generally toxic for the body. The wealth of the industrial societies in reality hides increasing distress.” If societies are serious about achieving an equitably good life for all in harmony with nature, they should seriously seek alternative models of development.

According to Odhiambo, in contrast to the dominant contemporary world view expressing a depersonalizing, materialistic dogma on development, almost all major and minor religions including indigenous African religions, emphasize the evolution of human beings to a higher level of righteousness, compassion, peace and divine insight. It is this purpose that should be governing the design of policies of development.

¹ Tevoedjre was also the former director of the ILO’s International Institute for Labour Studies. He is the author of *Poverty the Wealth of Mankind*, (which won the “prix de la vie economique” in Paris.

So where does the alternative development path lit by the Human Spirit lead?

First, it leads society to enlarge its treasures of knowledge.

Building progress on spiritual and intellectual premises to realize sustainable development suggests such references of thought as innate intuition, positive mysticism, and pure rationalism based on *a priori* knowledge of universals. This means working on the basis of belief that reality includes a harmonious order of qualities and relationships that are not evident to the physical senses but discernable through mind.

But to pursue this path to development requires rehabilitation of metaphysical and intuitive sources of knowledge. Rehabilitation is the word to be used, because largely since the 20th century, the virtual monopoly of empirical knowledge has all but reduced other sources of knowledge gained through philosophical enquiry, metaphysics, intuition, and poetic inspiration to illegitimacy and irrelevance. This view was confirmed by the Vienna School of Philosophy which assumed as self-evident that whatever has no meaning for the scientist has no meaning at all. French philosopher Jacques Maritain's work in identifying many different orders of knowledge is very instructive to those seeking a broader spectrum of sources of knowledge. Maritain's epistemology explains not just the nature of knowledge found in science and in philosophy, but also in religious faith, mysticism, and moral inclination. According to Maritain, Each of these different orders of knowledge is distinct from the other. They are not substitutes for one or the other because they deal with different dimensions of human life and because they are all necessary to the whole person reflecting both bodily individualism and their spiritual essence or personhood.

Education failing to offer students the knowledge and the discipline to be gained from studying revered classic literature; from occasions to develop capacities to distinguish respectable characters and noble actions as models for emulation; from an understanding of principles of musical rhythms and harmonies and from nature's other gifts cannot succeed in building the moral character that wise men and philosophers consider essential

to achieving happiness rooted in virtue. The failure to stress these forms of education may lie behind many of the problems facing society today.

In this context it is relevant to emphasize that the education of women in all these area of knowledge is essential to the future of the next generation. To realize progress in knowledge, women must be as highly educated as men and be regarded as their full and equal partners. If knowledge is not shared equally by all parties in the process those deficient in education will obstruct progress in knowledge and virtue. By including women in the exercise of the natural rights of humankind, the benefits of women's education in the virtues will lead to a more harmonious and natural society. Realizing and being able to express inherent talents and virtues, ennoble humanity and thereby women and men will be seen and will see themselves fulfilled as nature intended them to be.

Secondly it calls for a new look at poverty

There are thus inherent limitations in prevailing operational concepts and prescriptions for poverty that beg consideration if poverty in its largest sense is to be overcome. First, the focus on supply-solutions, aside from satisfying basic physical needs and certain aspects of education and skills training, is fundamentally material and therefore truncated. Second, the dominant conception of human dignity is considered dependent on quantifiable standards of living and is therefore fallacious.

But in treating this subject, it should be emphasized that if one gives greater emphasis to the spiritual and moral dimensions of life this does this mean abandoning efforts to reduce and eliminate poverty around the world!

Emphatically it is essential to note that criticism of the dominant development paradigm does not mean that meeting the essential needs of all people for nutritious food, facilities for health and education, decent work, and comfortable homes is no longer important. These objectives must be given top priority in development projects. Certainly these requirements for decent living are essential prerequisites to human flourishing in the deeper non material dimensions of the term. It does mean however, for the world in

general, that having eliminated the curse of suffering caused by immiseration and destitution and having satisfied basic needs to the extent deemed reasonable by a culturally sensitive and educated person of good heart: people have a better chance of fulfillment and happiness along a path to development that is illumined by the wisdom of the human spirit.. On this path the struggle for material enrichment is replaced by the struggle to master the “Art of Being” through cultivation of the graces of life

Poverty has many causes, consequences, and correlates that have to be reflected in policies and actions combating it, if NEPAD’s or the UN’s development targets are to be met. From the philosophical and theological perspectives, the most devastating form of poverty for the world is poverty of the spirit, the inner life, and of the creative imagination. It is the most insidious and the wide spread manifestation of indigence. This form of poverty exists in both rich and developing societies where ever the accumulations of material possessions in considered the only “way” to the good life. With spiritual poverty there is limited hope for human fulfillment and combined with material deprivation, little hope of ever emerging there from. It even threatens the vitality of a community and renders good governance very difficult – not to mention the exhaustion of natural resources and the trashing of the environment whereon the well-being of present and future generations depends . Poverty of the spirit,-- boredom, indifference, depression-- in a fragile society threatens the undoing or the bringing to naught of constructive assistance. Therefore, the notion of poverty of the spirit should loom large in efforts to overcome the material manifestations of destitution and deprivation.

In a similar vein, the spiritual, ethical and cultural dimensions of individual lives and societies are threatened by the impoverishing cultural homogenization facilitated by the present technological revolution. People must not be obliged to lose their cultural identities, time-honored values—in short their souls—to swim competitively in the global sea.

In this light it is offered that poverty must be reconceived and distinguished from destitution and indigence which reveal themselves when the poor are placed in the neighborhood of great material wealth or in absolute poverty--when people have no food, adequate shelter, or access to clean water. Albert Tevoedjre demonstrates that there are no lack of arguments to justify the notion that poverty is a positive value when it means having what is necessary or essential to a good life as defined by a reasonable and well educated person with a good heart. He quotes sociologist: R.A. Schermerhorn: In poverty, morality and even a touch of happiness is possible, never destitution. I don't know if you need this – plus it could be misinterpreted....Poverty of this kind is associated with purity and must be shared by all people if they wish human life on this planet to be sustained. Thus the irony today is that: rather than cure poverty we must adopt the purity, values, and virtues of the simplicity of life and the frugality in expenditures that poverty entails as a world society, if we sincerely wish to sustain an affluent human life rendered rich by its spiritual treasures and lived in harmony with nature. The world must adopt this style as its way of life. It is countries like yours, which are rich in human spirit and culture, that are best able to lead in this venture.

Simplicity and frugality are philosophic concepts and moral virtues:

1. Frugality is seen in the affirmation both of the goodness and the limitation of material things. Limited in that we cannot make a life of them.. Egregious dissatisfaction comes from having too few things while trying to make a life out of material things.
2. Simplicity requires single heartedness and at the same time sensitivity to the tough complex issues of life.

Furthermore, progress would be considerably advanced if the notion of dignity were separated from that of poverty. To mainstream experts on development, human dignity is an “overarching concept that reflects the specific mixture of values of power, well-being, respect, and enlightenment,” to be gained through modernization.¹ This connotation suggests that dignity is something to be given and taken away as an attribute of material affluence. This conception is self-defeating even for modernity and strays far from

dignity's original meaning. According to *Webster's Dictionary*, dignity refers "to bearing, conduct, or speech indicative of self-respect; nobility, elevation of character; worthiness; and the degree of excellence, either in estimation or in the order of nature." As such, dignity is a quality of the human spirit. It endows humans with impetus to better their lot. Absent the notion of inherent dignity and, convinced that dignity awaits development, individuals may feel deprived of the wherewithal to withstand hardships and to progress on meaningful paths--in other words, to have the facility for indigenous capacity building. Is it not dignity that calls forth the spirit enabling individuals to endure the most extreme hardship and to live nobly?

Third it takes another look at the notion of work:

Employment on this path is a matter significantly more complex than finding work, getting paid, or having a job and losing a job. Employment is a phenomenon by which individuals find social identity and purpose in society. It responds to the need to work and to inner longings for achievement and responsibility. Thus loss of a job can mean despair, alienation, and even an end to life. Work touches the heart of human nature. Higher wages, prestige and more jobs alone will not solve the underemployment or unemployment facing many societies today. Unemployment reflects societies failure to employ powers inherent in the human spirit: such as imagination, intellect, and creativity. Also, to be consider is that to serve the community is full time employment and can be perceived as equally natural, necessary and portentous to the preservation of the uniqueness of each human being. Such a view offsets the notion of employment as a drive for power, deference, and personal enrichment in economies governed by considerations of profit and competitiveness. It would enlarge the perception and offerings of meaningful work and satisfaction there from.

Fourth this path leads one to consider the phenomenon of happiness.

Happiness is intangible and of the spirit. It derives from human flourishing—an activity of the soul in accord with rationality and virtue. It is not dependent on material possessions, although lack thereof that engenders real suffering contributes to unhappiness. It cannot be sought in economic progress.

Moral Dimensions of the Politics of Development

Morality and ethics are specific facets of the spiritual dimension of development.

Considering general notions of social justice and their moral foundations, John Locke wrote in his work entitled, *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, 1754, “Our Savior’s great rule that we should love our neighbors as ourselves, is such a fundamental truth for the regulating of human society, that, I think, by that alone one might without difficulty determine all the cases and doubts in social morality.¹” This statement extracted from the writings of one of the great inspirations of liberalism offers stimulus and direction for analyzing the possibilities for building that heretofore ephemeral moral foundation for society that will be called simply “love.”

This concept of “love”, contrary to the current foundations for the western ideological approaches to social justice, has the quality of universality. Much has been written about it. Similar ideas are conveyed in writings of the ancient Greeks, African religious and philosophical thinkers, Taoists, Confucians, Islamic scholars, and Buddhists, to mention only the most widely accepted belief systems and philosophies.

The nature of this love is action. For most people it should mean virtuous behavior in acts of caring, giving, empathizing, compassionate responding, building bridges of solidarity and the like. It is a mutual love evoking the idea that in seeking the good of the other, one finds one’s own well-being.

The quest to reestablish such virtue, high meaning, and responsibility in public spheres, whether political, economic, or social, can be advanced by reexamining the dimensions of morality that have been variously introduced and discussed by philosophers and religious thinkers in many places around the globe over the course of history. The dimensions of morality most relevant in the politics of development are those that

promote fair play in interpersonal and international relations; the integrity of the actors and a noble purpose for humanity to seek as a whole.

Initiatives, undertaken to ensure fair play and harmony in interpersonal or international relations cannot promote mutual respect or meet demands of an untoward situation if the agent's greed, cowardice, and/or self-conceit operate to prevent their actualization. And, without some sense of high purpose or vision, it is unlikely that the necessary changes in the motivational psyche can be easy or natural. Some sense of purpose for moral behavior is essential to the successful implementation of policies promoting the common good and respect for nature.¹ This approach to morality provides a convenient framework for organizing the search for meaning and a renewed set and scale of values.

Equity and Harmony between the Actors

There is considerable agreement that the establishment of harmony and fair play in social intercourse and between humankind and nature is fundamental for human survival. Such acknowledgment is embodied in the moral codes of all prominent philosophies and religions. There is widespread awareness in religion and philosophy that flagrant inequalities and inequities in society are wrong. These aims and recognitions underlie the principles and axioms of national and international law, including the *Charter of the United Nations and the Conventions on Social and Economic and Political and Civil Rights*, and are latent in ongoing attempts to extend these laws to the most egregious problems confronting modern society.

Inner Virtues of the Actors

¹ Renowned thinkers in the South, West and East have long regarded human virtue and personal character as major determinants of wise statecraft. Aristotle, who sought knowledge in ancient Egypt whose civilization stems from the those inhabiting the Sahel millennia ago, holds that, if political actions appear to be right and just, it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately—the political actor or agent must be of excellent moral character when performing good works.¹ In the same vein, old and common

wisdom stresses that one cannot make people good by law; and, without good people one cannot have a good society.

The postmodern society, fragmented and directionless for better or worse—may be well served, even saved, by a large injection of traditional virtues. Magnanimity would impart dignity and nobility and enlarge the heart and spirit of humankind. Concomitantly, prudence would take the trouble to look beyond numbers and percentages to the essential issues of life. Honesty would call for transparency in all dealings. Compassion would favor mutual understanding and provide needed sympathy. Humility, humanity, and honor would demand effectiveness by all measures of social justice. But such infusion of virtues is unlikely unless there is a change in the objectives societies seek in building the global culture, now valued for consumption as well as opportunities for accumulating wealth and power. Society, if conscious of the need for a renewed sense of morality, can secure more virtuous agents by strengthening its traditional socializing institutions, in particular education, enabling them to more effectively impress on its members such civic values, as dignity, honor, and compassion.

Guiding Purpose and Meaning of Life

What is the purpose and meaning of human life? This is that mother of all questions that set us initially on the path to development enlightened by the human spirit. Vaclav Havel writes that only “humankind’s understanding of its place in the world will allow the development of new models of behavior, sets and scales of values, and objectives in life.”¹

The search for meaning and purpose, however, is not about grand ideologies or social experiments in the name of (higher being?) God. It is “simply” a quest for sense and direction that can inspire human flourishing, social harmony, and life in equilibrium with nature. It is not teleological: it is in its largest sense about “being.”. Meaning and purpose in just “being” echoes in the music of nature, is revealed in a story of a small bird, told by

Giuseppe Sermoni. “The bird, *Cyanosylvia svecica* (blue throat) delivers his most artistic song, objectively the most complex, when relaxed in the depth of its bush, poetizing to himself.” The song changes when the bird seeks to secure his own interests, becoming a monotonous repetition of strong strophes and all grace is lost.¹

Although the monopoly of human knowledge exerted by scientific rationality can be blamed for catapulting the individual into a global, technological civilization under a regime of domineering materiality, this is not the whole picture. Physics and higher mathematics point to many more significant ideas concerning the realities of the universe and life that can remove the chains binding human intentions to material circumstances and aspirations. With the assistance of enlightened reason, high mathematics, and imagination, modern science can also lead humanity to a high sense of purpose that perceives value in wisdom and ecological harmony. Physicist Brian Greene’s view summarizes this standpoint: He states that: To open our ideas to the true nature of the universe has always been one of physics’s primary purposes. It is hard to imagine a more mind stretching experience than learning, as we have over the last century that the reality we experience is but a glimmer of the reality that is.¹

The realization of cooperation, social harmony, integrity and high purpose in life depends on the abandonment of greed driven ideologies and social behaviors that are building and shaping impersonal communities, ignoring inequitable social and economic conditions, and relentlessly consuming natural resources. Societies must be transformed in line with redefined concepts of the “good life” and by exchanging current policies that tend to stunt progress in the Art of living for those that place high value on ideals such as the realization of every persons imaginative, creative, and expressive talents in the contexts of humane communities embellished with the riches of Nature. Such notions are Utopian in today's society, but no less effort can meet the challenges that are threatening the world today. But as agronomist and sociologist, Rene Dumont stated: the prospect for humanity today is Utopia or death.

In summary, almost everything remains to be done, intellectually and politically, to explore the practical implications of a vision of progress enriched by spiritual and moral considerations. It demands serious reconsideration of values and concomitant shifts in lifestyles. In a democratic system such changes cannot be imposed but must arise from an expression of the majority will to implement them. Yet, with wisely inspired determination, it should be possible for humanity, through cooperative efforts, to reduce the glaring inequities and disparities that exist between the rich and the poor and to better maintain the integrity of the natural environment. At the same time, work must continue on the project of elaborating a vision of society and the “good life” that best reflects harmony with and respect for Nature’s Universe.