

Human Rights : protectors of human capabilities essential for the prosperity of humankind

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The question of the purpose of human existence is a profound one that has occupied humanity throughout history. This question alone suggests that there is more to existence than just a material dwelling on earth and that the nature of human beings can be said to reflect a spiritual and noble essence.

Throughout this text, we consider the hypothesis that the reason for human being goes beyond reproduction and individual gratification and that the purpose of human existence is to work for the betterment of the world and to live together in concord and harmony.

What happens to the concept of human rights when viewed through the lens of this hypothesis? How can the betterment of the world be described? Whose task is it to work for it? And what are the prerequisites to work for the betterment of the world? These are the questions that we want to address in the following paragraphs.

To do so, we start by refining our assumption and say that the betterment of the world could be defined as the material and spiritual progress of everyone in the world.

Material progress refers to the development of the physical or material aspects of human life and society. It includes advancements in science, technology, economics, and the overall improvement of living conditions. Material progress aims to enhance the quality of life, alleviate poverty, and provide for the physical needs and comforts of people. Material progress should be understood as the availability and increase of material means, and not as an end in itself by accumulation of personal wealth. Material means enable and empower people, they are vital to the advancement of civilization, and achieving prosperity of humankind implies that all people should have access to such means.

Hence material progress is an essential component of the betterment of the world, and as such it is tightly coupled and interrelated with spiritual progress. A word of caution is however needed about our understanding of spirituality. It is too easy to view the concept in a superficial way - to comprehend it as little more than a tool for maximizing satisfaction or as a façade of activities or rituals designed to soothe the nerves and anxieties triggered by a materialistic life. Spiritual progress pertains to the development of the inner life and moral character of individuals. It involves the cultivation of virtues such as love, justice, humility, and service to others. Spiritual progress also encompasses the growth of collective qualities like unity, peace, and justice at the societal level.

The advancement of spiritual qualities is essential for giving meaning and purpose to material achievements, and it is through the combination of both, material and spiritual progress, that true prosperity of humankind can be achieved.

While trying to identify the protagonists in this process, we ask ourselves the next question: whose task is it to work for the material and spiritual progress of humanity? If we go back to our hypothesis and consider the betterment of the world to be the very purpose of human existence, then it is the task of every human being. It is a universal task, encompassing all the people on the planet.

The consciousness that universal participation is needed to the betterment of the world is essential. As the world encompasses everyone, the reality of everyone must be understood, and everyone must contribute. Indeed, it means that the world's population feels responsible for its collective destiny, and that every human being contributes towards collective action.

So, if with our hypothesis, the purpose of every person on the planet is to work for the betterment of the world, every person on the planet also must have the right to do so. Every human being must have the freedom to explore and investigate reality for themselves. The freedom to access existing knowledge and to build upon it must be guaranteed: universal education is essential to this process. Human beings must be free to know. Every human being must have the opportunity to develop the necessary skills and capacities to contribute to the betterment of the world.

This is also because the contribution of everyone is needed: the betterment of the world is not a small task. But small steps, if they are regular and rapid, add up to a great distance traveled.

Indeed the betterment of the world is not done by individuals in isolation, it is done collectively. Hence, cooperation and mutual assistance are needed, and at their very heart lies consultation. People must be free to consult together, to examine options dispassionately and select together appropriate courses of action.

These two elements, the “right to education” and the right to “freedom of expression” are only two examples of how the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights can be seen as the charta guaranteeing the empowerment of every person to contribute to the betterment of the world, and hence fulfill the purpose of their lives.

Corollarily, in regions and states where human rights are not protected, not only are the individuals hindered from fulfilling the purpose of their existence, but material and spiritual progress of the population as a whole becomes impossible. The deprivation of peoples from human rights through oppression and tyranny, through persecution and division is hence deeply unjust, and has as direct effect the stagnation or regression of material and spiritual progress. An example, one of the far too many in the world, is the harassment and persecution of Bahá'ís by Houthis in Yemen that is going on to this date. Another one is the Iranian government oppressing and persecuting not only the Bahá'ís in Iran, but the entire population, especially women and the youth. In Iran, people are blocked at every turn in their strive to work for the betterment of society. They can be barred from holding government jobs, and their shops and other enterprises are routinely closed or discriminated against by officials at all levels. Young people are prevented from attending university, and those who volunteer as educators to fill that gap have been arrested and imprisoned.

The endowments of human nature that make social progress achievable require protection, this protection was enshrined 1948 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Universal education, freedom of movement, access to information, and the opportunity to participate in political life are all aspects that require explicit guarantee by the international community. The same is true for freedom of thought and belief, including religious freedom, along with the right to hold opinions and express these opinions appropriately.

Seen from the angle that human rights protect the endowments of human nature, meaning the unique talents that we all possess and that enable social progress, human rights can become very palpable in our daily lives and go far beyond personal growth and individualistic goals. Let us explore some of the articles of the Universal Declaration of human rights concretely, and how these protectors of our endowments, these protectors of our noble gifts, empower each and everyone of us to contribute to the betterment of society on a daily basis.

How does for instance Article 26 help us : *“Everyone has the right to education”*? How can we make a noble use of “the right to education” for the betterment of the world? What kind of knowledge is it that we should aspire to, in order to acquire that would help us in this endeavor? How do we acquire it, and how can we distinguish helpful knowledge from information or understanding that is either not useful, irrelevant, misleading, or potentially detrimental to the betterment of the world ? How can the notion of seeing education as a means to develop our capacity to work for the betterment of the world help us being in a mindset of life-long learning, of a constant refinement of our own education? How can this attitude help our children to find joy in acquiring knowledge ? How can we help enforce this right in our neighborhood and make sure less privileged children get the complementary help they need in their education ?

Then, how does Article 20 help : *“Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association”*? This right ensures that in order to work for the betterment of the world, we can consult with the people around us. We can meet each other without fear, assemble and create groups of people who associate for thought and action. No one needs to work for the betterment of the world alone and in isolation. We are free to reach out to our neighbors, meet in the streets or in spaces that have even been especially designed for it. We are free to build outward-looking communities and work together with our neighbors in our neighborhoods.

As last examples in the present reflections, we consider Article 18 *“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”* and Article 19 *“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression”*. The freedom of opinion and expression is sometimes understood as the right to say anything by any means, even by insults, pronounce unjust accusations or spread false rumors. It is also understood by the right to organize and participate in debates where sides are taken, and where we camp on positions, debates which generally generate more heat than light. This does not pay tribute to the nobility of the rights protected by these articles, because they protect essential instruments for the betterment of the world: the freedom to think and the freedom to express your thoughts. As only in collective thought and consultation,

material and spiritual progress can be achieved, and this at every scale - be it global, in a nation, in a locality, the neighborhood or the family - this right protects the fact that everyone has the possibility to contribute to find solutions by bringing their thoughts (Article 18) to expression (Article 19) to find collectively the right course of action.

These are only a few examples to illustrate how, in our everyday life, human rights are the protectors of human capabilities essential for the prosperity of humankind, for spiritual and material progress, and hence for the betterment of the world - and that the universality of these rights are a necessity because, under our hypothesis, it is the purpose of the very existence of everyone of us to work towards the betterment of the world.

Human rights achieve their highest expression when understood in the context of human relationships—within the family, the community, the nations and among the community of nations. Viewed through this lens, human rights are a vehicle for all to realize their inherent potential and to ensure the same for others.