In Search of a Value System for Sustainable Civilization: Ethics and Quality

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Abstract:

To cope with several interrelated social problems it is wise to try to understand and attempt to solve root problems which cause many other problems. People's sense of ethics and aspirations for quality may influence their behavior. It is argued that humanity can benefit from a shift of paradigm to attack the problematics of conflicts and lack of peace, corruption, as well as efficiency-based dehumanization by promoting ethics and quality as rising values. Furthermore, for a sustainable civilization, one needs sustainable ethics and sustainable quality. The terms are also explained in the text.

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Sustainable ethics
Sustainable quality
Conflicts and peace studies
Efficiency-based dehumanization

1. Introduction: Paradigm Shifts

Thomas Kuhn's seminal work titled "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" clarified the need for paradigm shifts in science (Kuhn, 1962). (A systematic outline is provided by (Pajares)). For a shift of paradigm to be desirable and timely, one has to have a perceived (at least by few) problematic situation which may be solved after adopting a different conception or approach. It seems that humanity can benefit from a shift of paradigm to attack the problematic of conflicts and lack of peace, corruption, as well as efficiency-based dehumanization.

2. Some Problematics

2.1 Conflicts and Lack of Peace

It seems conflicts are everywhere in the inter-family, inter-group, inter-religion, and international relations. To pursue their conflict, some people even would kill not only what they perceive their "opponents" or "enemies" but also themselves. Some references on conflict are (Balancie and de La Grange, 1999), (Fisk and Shellenberg, 2000), (Grant, 1992), (Khalilzad and Lesser, 1998), and (Müller and Dieng, 2000). Several references also exist for understanding the sources of conflict as well as how to prevent, manage, and resolve
them (EPCPT), (ICMCT), (Jeong, 1999), and (Lieberman, 2002). Several international institutes devote their activities to peace studies (GIPRI), (NPC), (OPI), (PSI), (SIPRI), (UP), and (USIP). However, conflicts still prevail.

2.3 Corruption

Corruption is another problematic that humanity faces. A global corruption report and a World Bank's report on governance and anti-corruption are given at (GC) and (WB), respectively. In early 2002, a search on Internet provides nearly 2 million hits on "corruption" as opposed to nearly 1.8 million hits on "civilization!"

2.3 Efficiency-based Dehumanization

Efficiency is the act of working or operating quickly and effectively in an organized way. One of the fundamental characteristics of industrial age, as promoted by Taylor, was productivity; hence efficiency (TSM). Efficiency, though a very important metric, is often miscomprehended and pushed to extremes at the expense of the well-being of humans. It is even argued that it became a cult by dehumanization of society (Stein, 2001). Hence, a type of dehumanization, or degrading of humans and human values, which can be labelled, efficiency-based dehumanization is one of the problematics of civilized countries.

3. Sustainable Civilization

Civilization is a relatively high level of cultural and technological development. As expressed by Durant, "Civilization is social order promoting cultural creation. Four elements constitute it: economic provision, political organization, moral traditions, and the pursuit of knowledge." (Durant, 1935). Most of the previously industrial societies are now knowledge societies. Every economic/technological era brings its own value system and information age is no exception (Fisher, 2001). Sustainable civilizations are desirable (CM). Cultures are different and there are different value systems in different and even in the same region of the World. (Lewis, 2000) and (Laszlo et al, 1977). The following are important facts:

> "Since in most countries of the region the masses of the people still live at or near subsistence level, their goals focus on the satisfaction of their most pressing and basic needs with little attention to social, political, economic and cultural goals and objectives not directly related to matters of survival." (Laszlo et al., 1977, p 164).

> "The futures of both peace and Civilization depend upon understanding and cooperation among the political, spiritual, and intellectual leaders of the world's major civilizations. … In the emerging era, clashes of civilizations are the greatest threat to world peace, and an international order based on civilizations is the surest safeguard against world war." (Huntington, 1997, p. 321). It was also pointed out that "World peace hinges also on respect for human rights." (Laszlo et al, 1977, p. 243).

Often complex problems consist of several intertwined problems. However, some types of problems, i.e., root problems may cause other problems to emerge. In attempting to solve complex problems it is desirable to identify and solve root problems. It appears that ethics and quality are primordial for sustainability of civilizations. Ethics and quality can also be influential in advocating, teaching, and practising conflict management, peace support and peace assurance, as well as activities against corruption, and efficiency-based dehumanization. However, both ethics and quality should also be sustained.

3.1 Sustainable Ethics

"The term *ethic* means: (1a) A set of principles of right conduct. (1b) A theory or a system of moral values (i.e., values concerned with the judgment of the goodness or badness of human action and character.) *Ethics* refers to the general nature of morals and the specific moral choices to be made by a person. The respect for the rights of others is the essence of right conduct. It is also a fundamental concept in civilized societies, essential for the regulation of the social dynamics in order to sustain the civilization."

In an accompanying article, the need for ethics for sustainable civilized behavior for humans and for software agents is elaborated (Ören, 2002). Ethics is highly desirable; however, sustainability of the ethical behavior of individuals and organizations is of paramount importance. For example, in a corrupt society, ethical behavior is considered

naïve and those who have ethical behavior are indirectly penalized. However, a corrupt society cannot be a civilized society either. A civilization is lost by the degree of its corruption. To maintain a civilization, there should be necessary conditions to protect, nourish -and not devaluate- ethical behavior. Sustainable ethics refers to ethics within such conditions. Sustainable civilizations need sustainable ethics. Mechanisms should be explored and nourished for sustainability of ethics.

3.2 Sustainable Quality and Balanced Efficiency

Quality of individuals include the quality of their physical, psychological, and spiritual health; education/training, acquired knowledge and value systems; the quality of their activities, the products/services they generate; and the quality of their relationships with themselves, their immediate surroundings such as their families and friends, and with society and humanity. Quality of organizations, and government functions include the quality of their members and charters, their activities, their products/services, and their relationships. Quality of individuals, organizations, and the quality of international relations are desirable; but at a cost –sometimes money is the metric. In real systems, there are limitations and the choice of the priorities and the allocation of resources become important. Most often, quality appears to lower efficiency and efficiency considerations prevail over quality. Hence, in the name of efficiency, sacrifices are made from quality. On the other hand, if quality is pushed to such a level that efficiency is lowered too much, then the system and hence the quality cannot be sustained. An equilibrium has to be found between sustainable quality and tamed or balanced efficiency. In balancing the priorities, a value system which regards highly to "quality" would be helpful. It might even be worth thinking of balancing standards of living with quality of life. Without sustainable ethics, quality of life cannot be achieved.

5. A Quotation as a Conclusion

> `Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'
> `That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.
> `I don't much care where--' said Alice.
> `Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.
> `--so long as I get SOMEWHERE,' Alice added as an explanation.
> `Oh, you're sure to do that,' said the Cat, `if you only walk long enough.'
>   (Lewis Caroll, Alice in Wonderland, 1872).

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