

**Book Review: Human Dignity and Social Justice**

**Author: Pablo Gilabert**

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In the book taken up for review here, the author is a philosophy professor and he mixes philosophy, the mother of all sciences, with economics and other social sciences. It needs to be studied by economics students and teachers who have tough time in conceptualising and operationalising what the ideal or good society is for everyone on planet earth. A major headache in this regard concerns prioritising efficiency or equality and resolving the so-called equity-efficiency trade-off, if at all it is there.

One thing is clear. Answer cannot be found without at least having a philosophy-economics connect in thinking. For example, the University of Arkansas rightly nudges the economics and philosophy undergrads that they need to get out of their respective silos and that only through such a connect they can acquire a greater capacity to explore answers to questions like the following: “How can we make rational decisions? What is happiness, and how can people achieve it? How should we weigh the costs and benefits of laws, policies, and regulatory systems? What are the relative values of equality and economic efficiency, and how should we make trade-offs

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between them? What is the nature of justice, and is it ever permissible to act unjustly? What is the proper scope of the free market system? Are there some things that should never be for sale?”

Because most economics students pursue non-ethical economics, i.e. economics sans philosophical underpinnings of their multicultural backgrounds, like in Delhi University for example, they are fish out of water in making sense of and choosing from competing perspectives of what constitutes an ideal or good society as presented by the heterodox economist, Saros (2019) as follows.

Plato’s ideal society is ruled by philosopher-kings because philosophers are the wisest members of society. There is no democracy. There is a strict social hierarchy in terms of a warrior class and a class of slaves below the philosopher class. In the Thomas More’s Christian perspective of ideal society, people rotate living in the city and in the countryside. The economy is based on communally owned property. Necessities are freely distributed. There is a six-hour workday. Slaves perform the least pleasant work. Non-slaves are free most of the day to enjoy socializing with one another and learn about new subjects. Mahatma Gandhi’s good society, from the Hindu background, has economic self-sufficiency, protectionism for local economies, and the avoidance of materialism. The worst-off members of society are elevated in the pursuit of greater equality and a sense of brotherhood. According to the Islamic economists, the ideal society is ruled by theocratic governments adhering to Islamic law as set forth in the Quran and the Hadith. They enforce profit sharing, prohibition on the payment of interest, proper consumption that excludes the consumption of alcohol and pork, a wealth tax for redistribution to the poor, the avoidance of uncertainty like in gambling, and a belief in universal brotherhood. For Ayn Rand, who

has glorified individualism, market capitalism is the ideal society wherein the right to life and the right to property are sacrosanct. They are protected by the state. “Each individual has a right to do with his or her life or property whatever he or she wishes, provided he or she does not interfere with anyone else’s rights.” There is voluntary exchange of property. The neoclassical economists too idealise market capitalism as the one that obtains the most advantages with the least use of resources. In other words, economic efficiency is achieved by “full employment of resources in the least cost manner to produce combination of goods and services that consumers most desire. Competition between numerous buyers and sellers of privately owned property will automatically lead, as if by an invisible hand, to the economically efficient outcome”, statically and dynamically. For Karl Marx and Marxists, the ideal society is socialism and ultimately communism. Market capitalism is exploitative. The capitalist class exploits the working class. The latter will eventually establish a society in which working people own the means of production in common and all class distinctions are abolished. “Workers would be compensated according to their work and would contribute to production as they are able” under socialism. Later under communism, “workers would be compensated according to their need and would contribute to production as they are able”.

In this backdrop, there are two singular points of departure for drafting this book review on ideal or good society characterised by common good rooted in the notions of human dignity and social justice.

First, as underlined by the Markkula Centre for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University, the quest to create "the good society," "where the common good is the pursuit of the good in common" remains a mirage because, “A ruthless individualism, expressed primarily through a market mentality, has

invaded every sphere of our lives, undermining those institutions, such as the family or the university, that have traditionally functioned as foci of collective purposes, history, and culture. This lack of common purpose and concern for the common good bodes ill for a people claiming to be a democracy. Caught up in our private pursuits, we allow the workings of our major institutions -- the economy and government -- to go on "over our heads."... powerful forces affecting the lives of all of us are not operating under the norm of democratic consent. In particular, the private governments of the great corporations make decisions on the basis of their own advantage, not of the public good. The (federal/central) government has enormously increased its power, especially in the form of the military industrial complex, in ways that are almost invulnerable to citizen knowledge, much less control, on the grounds of national defence. The private rewards and the formal freedoms have obscured from us how much we have lost in genuine democratic control of the society we live in." We need "an informed and morally sensitive public active in discussing and debating issues ranging from international financing to day care, within a framework informed by a shared vision of a good society; and a citizenry capable of instituting reforms in our economic and political institutions so that they work for the common benefit of all peoples."

Second, according to *The Good Society* journal published by the Penn State University Press, "current versions of socialism and democratic capitalism fail to offer workable visions of a good society and seem increasingly to contradict such basic values as liberty, democracy, equality, and environmental sustainability."

Gilbert has resolved the problematic as posited above, by a marvellous integration of moral and political philosophies and economic ideas such as of

Kant and Marx. What has appealed to me the most in doing so is the argument that we can drop the typical Marxist view that Immanuel Kant as a dignitarian moralist and Karl Marx as a socialist-communist hostile to moral talk were on two different, non-intersecting roads. Gilabert has made the case that “we can articulate a Kantian conception of human dignity that helps to justify typically Marxian criticisms of capitalism as involving exploitation, domination, and alienation, and to develop the Marxian view of socialism as involving a combination of freedom and solidarity.”

In the typical Marxist view (Gasper, 2012), Kant and Marx do not see eye to eye, so to say. For Kant, “morality on a purely rational basis is required to control human impulses in order to prevent social conflict. The assumption underlying this view is that humans are competitive and seek their own self-interest and engage in a war of all against all if left to their own devices”. For Marx, “humans are not naturally competitive and violent. They are social creatures who cannot survive without cooperating with one another. Humans did not evolve as a collection of atomized individuals constantly at war with each other, but in social groups that depended on mutual support. It is only for the last 10,000 years or so, human society has been divided into antagonist classes wherein each class attempts to further its own interest by its own moral rules. Under capitalism, capitalist class morality is different from the working class morality. The latter becomes universal morality (morality in shared human nature) when the working class struggles to end exploitation and oppression and thereby represents in general the interests of all humanity.” Integral to this universal morality is what Marx in his 1859 essay, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, had written thus: “Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to

succeeding generations as *bonipatres familias* (good heads of the household)”.

Williams (2017) has sensibly argued that it is better to first see the common themes between Kant and Marx and recognise then the differences between the two therein. Both had admirable commitment to “critique, freedom (however differently defined), equality, human betterment and cosmopolitanism.” Both had “a progressive view of history as the expansion of human freedom; both praised self-determination and abhorred paternalism; both called for interpersonal and institutional arrangements in which people treated each other as ends and not merely as means; and both had a cosmopolitan view of the scope of the project of human emancipation.” The points of difference to be noted, however, are that Kant rejected revolutionary politics and supported top-down reform and justified religion in terms of morality based duty-performance as adhering to divine obligations.

Gilabert (2023) has advanced the discussion by an excellent transcendental synthesis of Kant and Marx to put forward ‘dignitarian socialism’ as the ideal or good society.

The idea of human dignity is the heart of Kant’s moral outlook. “Every human has equal dignity, according to Kant. What does this mean? We should always respect the humanity in others and we should only act in accordance with rules that should hold for everyone. This moral law is a truth of reason and hence all rational agents are bound by it. But in saying so, Kant had a narrow basis for human dignity in terms of an insufficient appreciation of some material and social aspects of human flourishing. For example, the problem with Kant is that although he claimed that in a just society people would have equal formal opportunities to compete for

economic advantages instead of being inescapably destined to certain positions such as lords or serfs, or masters and slaves, he also took the society to allow for greater inequalities regarding income, wealth, and other economic advantages.”Dignity for all cannot materialise in a society of deep structural inequalities and injustices.

By drawing on insights from Marx’s work, Kant’s narrow dignitarian account can be broadened by rooting it in socialist transformation of a capitalist society. A key idea of Marx is that socialism as the alternative to capitalism as a class society would instantiate the slogan “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs”. This is the abilities/needs principle of restructuring economy and society. This can be understood as “an elaboration of the dignitarian idea of solidaristic empowerment. This means that there are effective opportunities for productive activity involving self-realization rather than alienation. There is a social ethos and institutions articulating positive duties to produce to meet people’s basic needs. There is also an ethos and a scheme of distribution to access to consumption goods that recognises a responsibility to cooperate in production in terms of fair reciprocity. People also pursue their wellbeing in ways appropriate to their singular characteristics, by making their own choices concerning self-realization, consumption, and leisure.”

The abilities/needs principle helps “envision an economy of mutual affirmation amongst all producers and consumers. It is emancipatory because people are given real opportunities to engage in non-exploitative, non-dominating labour. The shaping of the economy would be subject to democratic authorization and contestation. Enjoying robust political liberties, people could collectively assess and reform economic arrangements. People confront and overcome scarcity by having opportunities to work in ways that

engage rather than stunt their valuable capacities for free and cooperative production. The dignity of the people is preserved by supporting their pursuit of a wellbeing involving the development and exercise of their valuable human capacities. There is no paternalism. Marx was hostile to developing blueprints for how socialist transformation should proceed.”

Radical democracy and self-emancipation are interlinked. “Under capitalism, what is presented in terms of ideology as being in the general interest of all in fact only serves the particular interest of the dominant class. But in socialist politics as a radical democracy, it is not so. People engage in public debate to figure out together what the idea of the social contract would really amount to for them, and decide by themselves what to do about social and economic justice.”

This broadened dignitarian approach to good society is a blaze of light to overcome all the hitherto dark, negative energies of the Left praxis.

April 22 and May 5 of 2024 marked the 300<sup>th</sup> and 206<sup>th</sup> birth anniversaries of Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx respectively. To me, reading Pablo Gilabert along with Howard Williams has, thus, been a satisfying, refreshing and ennobling integrative interface with both Kant and Marx as moral and political philosophers very much relevant for our turbulent times, in order to seek definitive redemption from the bad society of things falling apart for the majority of people in the hegemonic global neoliberal order of the past four decades.

Given that economists prefer to sidestep moral issues and now that Nobel laureate Angus Deaton has told them to return to ethics and think about what constitutes human wellbeing (Taylor, 2014; Deaton, 2024), reading this book is topical as also very useful.



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