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A Critique on Writing of Yuval Noah Harari on Justice: Our Sense of Justice Might Be Out of Date

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Abstract: Today, it is difficult to know what consequences our actions have and whether we are causing harm to the world. Size matters. In the complex modern global world, causal relations are highly ramified and complex. Harari rightly says that we may peacefully sit at home without physically harming anyone, yet we may be complicit in many unjust acts happening elsewhere in the world. Am I responsible for child labour in making shoes, which I am wearing? The concept of justice demands new meanings. The answer to our questions on justice, according to the author, does not lie in abandoning the ancient concept of justice but in reviving it in smaller ways as well as in bigger ways simultaneously. The answer lies in the goodwill to change structures that are entangled with injustices.

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Introduction

Size matters. In primitive times, humans knew the consequences of their actions, for they understood how their moral and immoral acts affected others. In distinct tiny human worlds of the past, where cause and effect relations were clear, it was easy to evaluate human acts. Stealing was a moral wrong because it robbed someone of something what is due to others. It was unfair to take away what is due to others. Unfairness and injustice were easy to see. But this is no longer the case. Today, it is difficult to know what consequences our actions have and whether we are causing harm to the world. Size matters. In the complex modern global world, causal relations are highly ramified and complex. Harari rightly says that we may peacefully sit at home without physically harming anyone, yet we may be complicit in many unjust acts happening elsewhere in the world. Am I responsible for child labour in making shoes, which I am wearing? The concept of justice demands new meanings.

Insights of Harari on Justice

Harari's vast knowledge of the world is commendable. He speaks on almost all affairs of social, political, religious and cultural realm. He rightly acknowledges that humans are no longer able to grasp what the practical world of universe wants to communicate. Harari says, "the bitter truth is that the world has simply become too complicated for our hunter-gatherer brains." The more humans explored the mysteries of the world, the more they know how little they know. A rather long quote from Harari himself says it vividly: "A primeval hunter-gatherer knew very well where her lunch came from (she gathered it herself), who made her moccasins (he slept twenty metres from her), and what her pension fund was doing (it

was playing in the mud. Back then, people had only one pension fund, called ‘children’).” Harari explicates the inability of the human minds to grasp the vast size of happenings in the world. It is not easy even for academicians to be aware of all the events around the world that affect humans primarily. Harari says: “Years of research might expose the fact that the government I voted for is secretly selling weapons to a shady dictator halfway across the world. But during the time it takes me to find that out, I might be missing far more important discoveries, such as the fate of the chickens whose eggs I ate for dinner.

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Changing starts from knowing. It is important to know that “most of the injustices in the contemporary world result from large-scale structural biases rather than from individual prejudices.”

The system is structured in such a way that those who make no effort to know can remain in blissful ignorance, and those who do make an effort will find it very difficult to discover the truth.” Which side should we choose to be with? Definitely, knowledge is better than ignorance. Harari himself warns, and so rightly: “The greatest crimes in modern history resulted not just from hatred and greed, but even more so from ignorance and indifference.” Changing starts from knowing. It is important to know that “most of the injustices in the contemporary world result from large-scale structural biases rather than from individual prejudices.” It is thus inevitable to change the structures that propagate biases. Everyone must take responsibility for actions of others, too, because we are part of one human world. In trying to comprehend and moral dilemmas of the issues of magnitude, Harari points out that people resort to one of four methods:

- (1) The first is to downsize the issue: to understand the Syrian civil war as though it were occurring between two hunters, one bad and one good.
- (2) The second is to focus on a touching human story, which ostensibly stands for the whole conflict. People do not show interest in statistics and data that explain the complexity of the conflicts of the world; but a personal story about the fate of one child activates their hearts and makes their blood boil (to donate) to save that child. Charity for larger scales are less effective.
- (3) The third method to deal with large-scale moral dilemmas is to weave conspiracy theories, such as, that multibillionaires are behind the scenes. How does the global economy function, and is it good or bad? That is too complicated to grasp. No one really understands what is going on in the world, and so no one is capable of pulling the strings effectively.
- (4) While the above four methods try to deny the facts, the fourth and ultimate method is to create a dogma that offers a safe haven from the frustrating complexity of reality.

However, Harari appears to be sceptical of a just world, and ends up with an aporia of being at loss without knowing which way to proceed: “Should we call it quits, then, and declare that the human quest to understand the truth and find justice has failed? Have we officially entered the Post-Truth Era?”

Personal Evaluation

Neither *Truth* will ever disappear, nor *Justice* will lose its meaning. The fact is that we are not really happy with the prevalent situation of abject poverty and useless wars in the midst of the world that has sources more than what humanity needs. Why are the sources of the world not equally distributed? Quitting is not the answer. Questioning is the beginning for change. Questioning and

dethroning the corrupt dons and electing honest leaders are important for a better democratic world. In a structured global world, we, too, are certainly complicit in evil acts happening somewhere, at least or more so, while benefitting the fruits of those acts. Every part of humanity suffers even when one part of humanity suffers. A perfect world is not possible either. What we need is a better, humane world of justice and equality. Religions are not mere promises of a safe haven but companions of the poor. They bring smile in their face. Inequalities may not disappear forever, but a just world is not impossible either.

To understand Harari's comments on modern demands of justice, we shall revisit various forms of justice: commutative, distributive and contributive. Commutative justice is blind and demands equal sharing that is due to everyone without discrimination. A commutative law may be blind but just and equal in its application to the rich or the poor independent of social evaluations and its resultant value is the same. Distributive justice refers to just sharing of common resources by the state to each citizen according to her or his need. Contributive justice refers to the contribution of the members of a society to the state. Distributive and contributive justice may also differ and depend on the capabilities of individuals. The Catholic church, in addition, promotes social justice, which includes a special concern for the poor. The principles solidarity and subsidiarity are offshoots of this social justice. Neither the principles, such as justice and equality, nor their meanings have become out of date. The spirit of their original senses continues to guide humanity. New problems require new solutions and not alterations or adjudgments in principles. Principles may unfold themselves with new meanings in new situations but they do not lose their content.

Instead of abandoning the complex world of knowledge and injustices that exist, we can begin to work for justice at every level. Small changes everywhere can help to bring about a bigger change in the global world with moral problems. Humanmade problems can

be corrected to a larger extent by humans themselves. Climate change and artificial intelligence (AI) are major challenges of today. We need global ethics of environment and AI. The world of science and technology will lead us to a great danger without ethics (Davis, 2014). We should not throw away the age-old norm of justice, but should be brought back by international communities to defend rights of discriminated folk and promote a more equal world. The world might become complex but basic human values are same. Injustices and corruptions are not mere outcome of structures but are caused by humans. We cannot blame a nonhuman system or structure, simply because they cannot change by themselves. Humans have created them; thus, change has to take place in the hearts and minds of individuals and communities, particularly, in those who make political and corporate decisions. Unfortunately, today's world has politicians who create more fake news than actual promises. I am convinced that change is possible if the enlightened minds do not prefer silence to the essential of speech. Injustices might continue to happen as long as just minds don't speak. Evilness is intrinsic to humans as they are free persons to choose to do good or bad, so is also goodness is intrinsic to humans as they are images of God of goodness. A solution for any humanmade problem is possible, if humans will. The solution does not lie merely in discovering a new theory that would change the future course of human actions, but much more in correcting the way we live now. We need to correct the fake stories and false storytellers. Returning to the values of the past would enable humans to mend the ways of humans in the complex world as well.

Application to the Present Day

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a “*Lebensstil*” (lifestyle) discussion particularly in Germany. The question then was – and it is still pertinent in the 21st century: how affects my *Lebensstil* the life of people in the so-called “third world or developing countries.” Are Europeans responsible for conflicts and wars in Africa, because their weapons are used? Are we responsible for poverty in Africa,

since their coffee is bought at cheaper rates? There is a global structural injustice – perhaps one could also find a connection to “original sin,” that humans make mistakes and are sinful by nature. Just like, dignity is inseparable from the human condition, so also sin is inseparable from the human condition. Humans are existentially free to choose what they wish: to do good or to do evil. Humans are inherently ordained with freedom. We know we are free being but have not understood freedom and its scope fully. We know what justice means yet understand it differently. One thing is clear that our intentional and unintentional activities have their repercussions on the human as well as material world. What we can do personally? We need to check our own desires and wants, adapt to a simple, humble and a just need-based lifestyle that would not steal the needs of others. A personal conversion is vital for a societal change.

Concluding Remarks

Harari ends Chapter 16 with an “aporia”: the author, and perhaps also the entire humankind, secular persons and atheists, is/are at a loss: what to do? For a scrupulous person, this “aporia,” namely, being at a loss is a heavy burden, it can block one’s good will etc. In this context, the prayer of Oscar Romero has a consoling message for us: “We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realising that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.” This prayer may not count for Harari. He is extremely critique of religious dogmas. Although the Christian religions in Europe have contributed to developing the concept of human dignity and of human rights, the political representations of the Christian minds have not managed to eradicate this “aporia.” Perhaps, they have contributed much to create such situation. The answer does not lie in abandoning the ancient concept of

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justice but in reviving it in smaller ways as well as in bigger ways simultaneously. The answer lies in the goodwill to change structures that are entangled with injustices. Hope is enriching. Helplessness frustrates. Religions offer hope and change.

The prayer often and widely shared as ‘The Óscar Romero Prayer’ brings forward the powerful message which Romero was conveying (Romero, n.d.). Interestingly, these words are commonly attributed to Óscar Romero, but they were never spoken by him. The prayer was composed by Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, for a homily by Cardinal John Dearden in 1979 at a celebration of departed priests. Pope Francis used this prayer in December 2015 in his Christmas address to the Roman Curia.

*It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.*

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church’s mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realising that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own

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