

# Transvaluing “Normal” Values

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The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche used the term “transvaluation of values”<sup>1</sup> to advocate a paradigmatic revision of the values of his times, which he felt were powerless to help form a self-assured and assertive civilisation. Nietzsche was especially critical of what he considered to be the effete religious and moral culture of his times, best expressed by his famous aphorism, viz., “God is dead” (Nietzsche 1974, 167). He was less concerned about the ontological status of a metaphysical being, as compared to the dysfunctional social energies and temperaments associated with the collective imagination of such a being, and what this resulted in, by way of the formation of a civilization.

Today, we find ourselves at a similar junction in human history, when we are compelled to reconsider the “normal” values which shape us as diverse communities and as a human family. We have come a full circle from the reprehension of Nietzsche, and are now paradoxically compelled to confront an equally repugnant world, suffused with values of self-interest, savage competition and xenophobia. It is now this world of values which animates us that is in need of transvaluation, if we are to thrive—or at the very least survive—as a human community and a healthy planet.

The present pandemic serves as a good crisis moment for us to collectively interrogate and refashion our prevailing values, in favour of those that are more gentle, holistic and sustainable. The word “crisis” was interestingly first used in the

English language as the turning point in a disease.<sup>2</sup> Persons, communities and nations may capitulate under the oppressive weight of the present crisis. But for those more optimistically, collaboratively and productively oriented, the present crisis provides us with an opportunity to rise like the proverbial phoenix from the ashes, to learn from the limitations and failures of the past, and to support movements of change which will motivate people towards the creation of wholesome perspectives of meaning, purpose and value. We have been provided with a rare global sabbatical, in order to re-examine and reconstruct our core values within different aspects or spheres of human life and engagement.

## 1. Personal Realization

Those who are more materially privileged the world over—especially those who live in urbanized, middle and upper class ghettos—have been compelled to realize, at least to an extent, how their freedom of movement and their many resources have often been taken for granted. They have been challenged to live simpler lives, thereby using fewer of the earth's precious resources. They have also been compelled to slow down—and to admit, perhaps grudgingly, that the world can get along as well without them. It has been a body blow to people's egos, often fattened by achievement and adulation.

The world of privilege, influence and access has been relativized, along with all the accoutrements of high social living. One may have all the wealth in the world, but what is its worth when freedom of movement and purchase is extremely limited and when confronted with a virus which is not impressed by money or power? Also, the many surplus goods that money can buy have been called into question, as we realize that we can live without them quite comfortably and meaningfully. Furthermore, the value of wealth has never been as seriously relativized in our lifetimes, when whole economies are going into meltdown on account of the dismantling of the normal flow or transfer of various resources and the guarantee of the availability and services of skilled and available workers.

For those less privileged—that is, for the vast majority of humanity—the ugly

character of social differences has been exacerbated. The virus understandably has been more lethal for those with less immunity; besides the elderly the world over, the virus will understandably be more devastating for those who do not have the resources to live healthy lives. The normal instructions to wash and sanitize one's hands often, wear protective gear and keep a safe distance from others cannot reasonably apply to vast swathes of humanity, for whom a continuous supply of water and the ability to live in a private space at home is a pipe dream. For a huge segment of the human population, the economic downturn has competed with the threat of the virus, in terms of constituting serious personal and domestic disruption.

By way of a transvaluation of personal values, we are at a moment when we need to redefine our basic life orientation and values, separating the wheat of useful personal projects and activities from the chaff of mindless and addictive ones. It is time to re-examine various aspects of our lives: the pace and intensity at which we live—sometimes necessary, sometimes built up by hype; the various tasks that we undertake—some needed, some superfluous; the persons we associate with and the relationships we cultivate—some nourishing, some toxic; the material goods we need versus the surplus that we have accumulated; the work situations, institutions and corporations with which we have been associated—some transparent, collaborative and energizing, others bureaucratic, competitive and possessed by a poor work culture. The time is ripe to reconsider our basic life orientations, options and habits.

## 2. Existential authenticity

Beneath the necessary discernment associated with the appropriateness of these external choices related to our personal and professional lives, deeper existential questions pertaining to fundamental ways of being, valuing, relating and doing also need to be better understood and addressed. In the famous words of Socrates, “the unexamined life is not worth living.”<sup>3</sup> The collective human lockdown has compelled us to mull over—subconsciously and perhaps grudgingly—the purpose, value and limited sojourn of life, without being able to escape into our

usual distractions and addictions. The challenges of the existential philosophers come to mind: to live authentic lives confronted with the sure possibility of death, which we are seeing all around, without conveniently postponing the relevance of the question of the meaning and purpose of life itself. <sup>4</sup>

In terms of the transvaluation of our deepest existential inclinations and options, we need to explore what it is that will generate the most peace in our personal lives and the most harmony in our collective lives. In the area of 'valuing', it is important to distinguish between the frivolous and the glamorous on the one hand—largely driven by a false and transient sense of desire and worth, and on the other hand more substantial, productive and inclusive visions, purposes and projects. In the area of interpersonal and social relationships: how may we as individuals and a human community create wholesome ways and habits of relating, which respect personal dignity and mutual aspirations?

How may we transcend our temporal obsession with the past and future, and live more in the present, which is the most temporally real, as compared to living in an often flawed and imperfect past and an ambiguous and uncertain future? (Tolle 1997). How may we forgive ourselves and others for the transgressions of the past and move on with our life journeys, rather than succumb to the crippling reliving of wounded narratives between persons and communities? *In Memory, History and Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur has an interesting excursus on the theme of "forgiveness", towards the end of the book (Ricoeur 2004). For healthy living, we need to learn the skill and art of productive forgetting and forgiving.

Another opportunity the pandemic places before us is to rediscover the simple joys of being and relating, rather than lose our selves in the many addictive games driven by power, greed and raw ambition. In *Being and Having*, Gabriel Marcel argues that the most significant aspects of life are a mystery to be lived and explored, rather than problems to be solved and mastered (Marcel 1965). The rise of consumerism and a technological rationality over the past hundred years have tipped the scales in favour of an obsession with having rather than a celebration of being, resulting in a diminishment of the mystery of the human spirit. In his book *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse provides an exhaustive critique of our current predicament, which has only become exacerbated over time. (Marcuse 2006).

### 3. Domestic attunement

At least for those who have a home, there has never been as much time and opportunity to relate with friends and families, either really or virtually. This has been an opportunity to feel “at home” while literally being confined to one’s home. Unlike any time in human history, one need not go out of one’s house to relate with others socially or to engage with others professionally at a mass scale—provided, of course, that one has the necessary tools of communication and production enabled by computer hardware and software and the internet, and access to information and possibilities of engagement which mass and social media provide.

However, while such time may be valuable for introspection and personal conversation with close circles of family and friends, we could as easily succumb to frustration and despair—from being denied to move around freely or from being compelled to relate constantly and closely with a small set of people. It is not surprising that cases of anxiety disorders, depression and even suicidal tendencies will have risen during this period, especially if domestic living conditions and relationships are the cause for emotional stress. Also, instances of domestic violence and physical abuse have significantly increased during the period of the lockdown. Women are the most vulnerable in these circumstances, not only in materially developing nations but even in supposedly developed and progressive nations. Living in close domestic proximity can bring out the best and the worst in us.

For those who are homeless or ousted from temporary homes or those far from their homes—like those stuck in distant lands or millions of migrant workers—this has been a disconcerting experience. The value of having a home to return to, however modest its means, has perhaps never been as greatly felt for such people. It is heartrending to hear stories of those—including those in the health services—who have returned to their villages or housing communities, but are unjustifiably not granted access to their domestic spaces, as they are suspected of being carriers of the virus.

It is perhaps time to rediscover the value of being “at home.” While for a few

human beings, it really does not matter whether one is at one's current home or by chance anywhere else on the planet, for most human beings the space of home, homesteads, the "native place" or the domestic terrain to which one or one's ancestors have an umbilical relationship—all of these matter. These spaces are existentially significant as they provide an earthy root or base of cultural or familial origin which seems to be primordial.

More than at any other time in human history, a significant number of persons and families live far away from their places of geographical and cultural origin. The point, however, is to establish a sense of "being at home" wherever one finds oneself or chooses to be—as persons or as families. Modern forces of commerce and consumerism—especially in urbanized climes—have converted homes into hostels, in which family members have quite distinct timetables, and even if there is a chance of being physically at home at the same time, there is no guarantee that interpersonal exchange, the sharing of personal narratives and caring for one another takes place. It is paradoxical and tragic that information and communication technology have diminished, rather than enhanced the conditions for wholesome interpersonal communication.

Today, we need to examine whether we are spending quality time with our families, loved ones and friends, whether we have apportioned time to cultivate neighbourhoods where people know each other and are interested and helpful in each other's lives—as opposed to being strangers who fleetingly meet on the stairways. We could move towards forming better neighbourly communities, where the needs of the elderly and the vulnerable are better taken care of. In places where governments and civic bodies can hardly be relied upon for providing adequate services and security, it is imperative that human communities the world over begin to create homely spaces, not only within nuclear families, but within proximate communities and neighbourhoods. This is more possible in rural areas but needs to materialize to a larger extent in urban spaces as well, without creating unwholesome and exclusive ghettos. Autonomy and isolation—the seeming signature advantage of urban life—need to be overcome, replaced by healthier conditions for communication, interdependence and, preferably, communion.

## 4. Educational revisioning

While home-schooling and a multitude of virtual meetings and webinars have temporarily replaced classroom learning exercises, we are still at a nascent stage of the use of technology for mass education. For some it is a wonderful opportunity to explore new frontiers which could make education more accessible and affordable. For others it has been a stressful experience of information and webinar overload. This stress is shared by children, teachers, educationists and parents—each of whom have quite different expectations when it comes to online learning.

A good development is that educational and entertainment resources are being shared more willingly, calling into radical question the notion of intellectual property rights. However, this situation too will likely soon succumb to competitive market forces struggling to gain supremacy in the digital world, rather than continue along the more sanguine pathway of collaborative learning. A number of ICT companies are quickly cashing in on the emergency introduced by the pandemic, in terms of transforming the current transient necessity of online learning into the new normal.

The pandemic does provide us with an opportunity to re-examine the competitive and routine format of mass learning to which we have been accustomed. Our normal systems of education leave much to be desired, as the primary stakeholders—students, teachers and parents—often seem unfulfilled, for diverse reasons. Today there is an obvious need to focus on other aspects of learning, besides cognitive abilities. More attention needs to be paid to the cultivation of emotional intelligence, social intelligence, and spiritual intelligence. Another field that has emerged is “adversity intelligence”—the need to develop strong coping and resilient mechanisms in a world of uncertainty and stress (Stoltz 1997). Learning from failure needs to be seen as being as important, if not more, than learning from success. The mindless drive to compete and succeed which is planted in our children’s minds needs to be replaced with an understanding of life which celebrates collaboration and mutually productive work projects. Success needs to be measured trans-personally—as is the custom in indigenous communities the world over—that is, in terms of how much one is contributing to the community, rather than how much one has singularly achieved.

Perhaps the best learning outcome of this experience is the possibility for education to be democratized in terms of being easily available, made more affordable, and most importantly, being freely shared across continents. Online academic programmes—including higher education programmes—could be offered more often and more easily to remote areas which are otherwise neglected. For the first time, we realize the possibility of linking the best minds and educational resources across the world with the most disadvantaged populations. Numerous non-governmental and non-profit agencies could take advantage of this possibility, in order to bridge the gap between those who have access to information and education and those who live on the peripheries and are thereby excluded from educational possibilities.

## 5. Ethical revaluation

Our true character and values emerge in such crises, and are reflected in the choices we make, as persons and as communities. Our new heroes are not those who have money, power, fame or educational degrees, but those who are willing to reach out and help. Many stellar examples abound of people helping vulnerable others with food, medicines, health care and temporary shelter. The true nature of ethics has perhaps never been as clearly revealed: not as a personal and often conformist or obsessive exercise, but as a response to social needs, in terms of compassion and acts of caring, both in policy and in practice.

As a nation it will take generations to forget the way the politically and materially secure have turned their backs on the millions of migrant workers who might as well have belonged to another country. Our collective ethical standpoint has been exposed: the “right” and the “good” are privatized, and do not apply to the common good. This is a puerile caricature and inversion of ethical idealism.

Besides these class differences which have become noticeable all over the world, in our country—and perhaps elsewhere—the pandemic has been politized and communalized. In many cases, the media have provided ample grist to accusatory narratives targeted at minority communities. On the other side of

the planet rage has erupted over the treatment meted out to a racial minority. This has gained traction in many parts of the Western world, in which people are risking their lives in the context of the pandemic to make a protest statement and to demand change in how power is used violently to suppress citizens in the name of law and order. The ghost of Foucault is haunting the cities of the West, mired in racist prejudices (Foucault 1995).<sup>5</sup> In his many works, Michel Foucault has raised poignant questions about some of the most vital aspects of social life, and about how social mechanisms are operationalized in order to discipline and punish those who are not at the centre of privilege and power—in this case, people of “colour”.

We in the East and the South are perhaps worse off, for various reasons: the long histories of various types of systemic oppression (gender, caste, race, class), the lack of a culture or spirit of enlightened and concerted protest, the dearth of safeguards for whistle-blowers and protesters, the co-opting of potential opposition or radical leaders by vested political interests, etc.—all of these factors coalescing into the creation of rock-solid obstacles for radical social change.

The nature of ethics in traditional cultures and societies needs a transvaluation from a focus on the “good” to that of the “right”. The good privileges the dominance of past beliefs and practices, which include all of the hierarchies and binaries of tradition—many of them clearly oppressive. This retrograde attitude needs to be revisited, to make way for the ethics of the “right”, which privileges the nature of present relations and social structures, and the appropriateness or justice entailed in terms of the distribution and operative practices of power. The collective understanding of the “good” needs to be purified of its dysfunctional nuances, and restored in terms of the creation of more just and peaceful social structures and relations. Individualistic and privatized ethics need to be subservient to collective concerns. Communities and sub-cultures need to review and redesign the social texture of the often jagged edges which distance themselves from others, especially those taking the form of privilege or a Master-Slave dynamic.

## 6. Socio-economic reorientation

The most shameful phenomenon associated with the pandemic in India is the collateral damage done to the informal working class—which constitutes a huge underbelly of our nation. Vast swathes of humanity have suddenly become dispossessed of their already meagre livelihoods, and worse—are abandoned by the state and employers and the cities which used their services but didn't care much about their social securities. They were socially orphaned overnight.

We have taken their services for granted: the hidden and underpaid services of manual, monotonous, unskilled and unorganized labour. We live in two intertwined communities: India and Bharat. We have overvalued and overpaid India, while exploiting Bharat to the utmost. Images of powerless working class Bharat helplessly fleeing from an uncaring and mercenary India will remain etched in our memories forever. They will perhaps constitute the defining self and public image of India as a nation, for years to come (Nallu 2020). This is a symbol of yet one more rupture within our already thin social fabric.

The economic sphere is perhaps the most tenuous of all the human aspects we have considered as part of our post-Covid transvaluation of values, especially in India. The working class is extremely vulnerable, and the likelihood of social security or even institutional safeguards to guarantee workers' rights is extremely fragile, and may continue to be so for some time to come. The possibility of the informal sector to become more organized seems dim, and the occurrence of farmer suicides in the rural areas and growing unemployment in the urban areas may unfortunately continue. The recent return of scores of workers to the heartland may prove to be a boon to economic revival in rural areas and smaller towns, but whether there will be sufficient political and administrative will and adequate institutional and entrepreneurial interest to get the most out of this situation for all concerned is uncertain.<sup>6</sup>

Unless policy makers across the political spectrum work in tandem with business leaders and entrepreneurs to create wholesome conditions for a productive work culture which will satisfy all stakeholders and ensure minimal justice and wages—which seems to be asking for a miracle—nothing of much significance

will materialize. There is a need for reliable legal and institutional checks and balances to guarantee equality and justice, but in a situation in which political expediency seems to matter more than economic and distributive wellbeing, unfortunately the near future looks dim.

## **7. Geo-political realignment**

The power games and turf wars that are played out normally in the geo-political sphere now seem trivial. We have realized that we are far more interrelated and co-dependent than we think. The only way we could get out of the pandemic is if everyone cooperates, as nations cannot exist in political bubbles. Cross-national trade interests and travel and tourism opportunities are only two examples of why we need to make our boundaries porous enough for human life to flourish in a mutually productive manner.

This particular crisis has thrown up leadership qualities in stark relief. It has become easier to distinguish between leaders who subsist on suspicion and division, and those who adopt a more collaborative and productive approach. Not surprisingly, many of the leaders in nations which are addressing the pandemic in more empathetic—and successful—ways are women (Champoux-Paille and Croteau 2020), in contrast to alpha male leaders who are still concerned about their image and the power that they wield (Lewis 2020). Also, the bubble of the value and efficiency of centralized power has burst. In such crisis situations—which could well serve as a template for more normal times—power is best utilized at the peripheries, where local leaders and communities are better able to decide how to adjudicate resources, so as to live life optimally and in harmony with others (Ghose 2020).

## **8. Organizational restructuring**

Perhaps one of the most obvious learnings from this crisis is the fact that we can lighten our travel-based carbon footprint enormously by hosting national

and international meetings and conferences online. We have learned how to do work from home in quite diverse professions, thereby causing much less traffic congestion and vehicular pollution. More fundamentally, the intensity, stress and hype related to work has been mitigated to a large extent. Work can be spaced out and made more flexible, according to different rhythms of life matching quite diverse personal biological clocks. The nine to five work routine may well be buried with the Covid virus, if employers, companies and Governments are willing to use imagination and courage to design a new work culture.

Many employers are coming to realize that there is no need to invest huge financial resources in renting or owning office spaces. They are also realizing that several jobs within the organization are either redundant or may easily be outsourced. This downsizing or rightsizing is not good for employment generation, and may further add to the economic woes of almost the whole human family. But it does create opportunities to redefine the workspace, and new types of job profiles which require less physical reporting or contact. New circumstances will hopefully give rise to new and flexible job portfolios. The challenge will be to create conditions which do not instrumentalise or prove detrimental to the dignity of human labour.

## **9. Environmental rejuvenation**

The rapacious projects of humankind over the earth's resources have been stalled, at least for a little while. The planet is happy for this sabbatical, as it has provided a rare opportunity for environmental healing and revitalization. We have perhaps never had such low levels of pollution in our lifetimes. The other life forms with whom we share our planet have become more assertive about their presence, given the temporary absence of their main predator in public spaces. It has become more possible for us to recognize the presence and beauty of these other life forms, which we otherwise take for granted, or worse, use instrumentally for profit, pleasure or to satiate our appetites.

It does not require much argumentation today to assert the need for policy and

practical revision in favour of environmental wellbeing. If we do not respond to this crisis intelligently and in a concerted manner, the survival of the human species may well be compromised—or at the very least, health conditions across the world will deteriorate substantially. Given the many aspects of value revision above, however, it is hoped that there will be a consequent lowering of mindless consumptive patterns—which may augur some hope in terms of the restoration of healthy and sustainable environmental conditions.

## Concluding remarks

Perhaps the most important learning of all is our vulnerability as persons, communities and a human family. Life is fragile and mysterious, and we are not entirely in control of it. It is time that hubris, which is in abundant supply among the dominating personalities and privileged segments of the human family, is replaced by humility—a virtue that is understandably more prevalent among the disadvantaged and excluded, but also among those more enlightened and concerned about collective and inclusive wellbeing.

We are not masters of our destiny, but we need not be victims of limiting natural forces. We are endowed with the resources to emerge from this crisis, as the human family has emerged from several crises over time. More than this, we have the potential to co-create a fresh set of values, lifestyles and relationships, based on these new learnings. If wisdom and generosity prevail, we will embrace healthy, enjoyable and fruitful ways of living together, towards a more promising human and planetary family life. It would be tragic if, after this collective planetary crisis, we simply get back to “normalcy”.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In *The Antichrist* (originally published in 1895), Friedrich Nietzsche (1918, 69) states, “*we ourselves, we free spirits, are already a transvaluation of all values, a visualized declaration of war and victory against all the old concepts of “true” and “not true,”*” (original italics).

<sup>2</sup> The word “crisis” was first used in English “probably about 1425, [meaning a] turning point in a disease . . . It comes from Latin *crisis*, from Greek *krisis* a separating, discrimination, decision, from *krinein* to separate, decide, judge . . . The sense of decisive moment, is first recorded in English in 1627 as a figurative extension of the original medical meaning.” Robert Barnhart, ed., *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* (New York: Chambers, 1988), 235.

<sup>3</sup> These words were ostensibly uttered by Socrates in his defense, before he was condemned to death. They are to be found in Plato’s *Apology* 38a: “for a human being a life without examination is actually not worth living.” (Rowe 2010, 187)

<sup>4</sup> In *Being and Time* (originally published in 1927), Heidegger argues for the nature of human existence in terms of temporality, or as a “being towards death.” Consequently, the human vocation ought not to easily succumb to the pressure, convenience and distraction of living lives in conformity with meagre and faux popular interests.

<sup>5</sup> The four sections of Michel Foucault’s classic work, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (originally published in 1975), viz., Torture, Punishment, Discipline and Prison, constitute a poignant analysis of how society employs mechanisms of institutionalized control, largely driven and governed by interests of power and domination.

<sup>6</sup> Prateek Raj and Rishikesha Krishnan (June 16, 2020) optimistically argue that “the coronavirus pandemic has caused an unprecedented disruption in the global economy. This disruption has forced businesses and investors to reconsider where and how to invest. Such a shake-up opens an opportunity for India, especially for its Hindi heartland.”

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