

**Part Three**

**Essence**

**and**

**Social History**

## Chapter 7

# Society: Appropriate and Inappropriate

The concepts of “cosmogogenesis,” “evolution,” and “history” presupposes movement through time. The cosmos unfolds, emerges, evolves, and with the advent of human beings the destiny of the cosmos is chosen self-awarely. Human history is a part of nature. Human choices make history. Human choices determine the destiny of nature on this planet and possibly elsewhere. Social ethics in its larger scope is a discussion about “making history” through human choices.

So how do we talk about good choices in the making of history? When we raise the question of “good” in social ethics, we must ask the question “good with respect to what?” There is always some center of value in terms of which various social conditions and outcomes are judged good or bad. This center of value may be mostly unconscious, partly conscious, or fully conscious. Sometimes a conscious or somewhat conscious center of value is put into rational form as a social ideology. Some familiar social ideologies are: communism, democratic socialism, a free-market and democratic ideology favoring the working classes, a free-market and democratic ideology favoring the investing classes, a benevolent monarchy, a theocratic monarchy, and perhaps we should also include a nationalistic police state centered in an idealized strong man.

A particular social ideology may be accepted and affirmed by individual people for many reasons having to do with those individuals’ personal centers of value. Some may accept a social ideology because it is the thinking of their family, friends, or peers and because they want to be accepted as a loyal member of these groups. Others may accept a social ideology because it serves their business interests. Some may espouse their social ideology because it appears to support their private, personal, religious, or family values. Some may accept a social ideology because it is genuinely part of their attempt to make sense of the world and be responsible in that world. However, even our honest efforts toward “making sense of things” often boils down to defending our favorite delusions.

In the midst of this complex maze of conflicting views, how do we decide how to think about good or bad society? First of all, we need to clarify that “good and bad,” “good and evil,” “right and wrong” are all trick categories. Such categories trick us into limited views, views that are idealistic impossibilities or views that are narrowly conservative of some status quo. When we phrase our social ethics in terms of “appropriate and inappropriate” rather than “good and evil,” we can more easily avoid pitfalls. There is, after all, no final social model that can be called the good society by which all other societies can be judged. Society building is an ongoing process taking place in ever new situations. In each new situation we can ask, “What are the appropriate social structures for this situation at this time for this people in this place?”

Yet even when we use “appropriate and inappropriate” ethics, we face pitfalls. We can reduce such thinking to very narrow scopes of consideration or to very short periods of time. We need to consider inclusive and long-range contexts in order to use this method of ethical thinking in an optimal fashion. Here is the list of ethical overviews that have already been explored in previous chapters:

- (1) The vision of Essential Humanity means that humanity is potentially a positive force in spite of all its depravity.
- (2) Compassion, which is part of that Essential Humanity, implies the possibility and the

imperative to affirm each and every human being no matter how deeply he or she is estranged from Essential Humanity.

(3) Our Essential Humanity includes Trust in REALITY, which means a thoroughgoing affirmation of both nature and humanity as a whole.

(4) Our Essential Humanity includes Freedom, which means that human beings have the potential to create amazingly better solutions to any situation.

(5) Every society has economic, political, and cultural processes, and the structural forms of these processes need to exist in a mutually enhancing balance.

(6) Human life includes not only social processes but also singularity processes and intimacy processes. Social processes need to be structured in such a way that all these dimensions of human functioning are balanced in a mutually enhancing manner.

(7) Humanity is part of nature. We can be an enrichment and a danger to the natural planet that has spawned us. Social processes need to be structured in such a way that humanity and the natural planet are balanced in a mutually enhancing manner.

Such broad overviews are needed to inform a competent Spirit-based ethics. But even with such basic guidelines in mind, many other considerations remain to be determined. A Spirit-based ethics is actually a master question rather than a master answer. The Spirit-based master question is: "What does it mean for our social ethics to be fully 'Realistic' within this time and place?" A Spirit-based social ethics is not an ideology that stands alongside other ideologies in the ongoing battle among dogmatic minds. A Spirit-based ethics is not an ideology at all. Rather, a Spirit-based ethics is a REALITY-grounded perspective that can judge the various ideologies as "good for now," "good for here," "somewhat good," "somewhat bad," "mostly bad," "basically evil," and so on. A Spirit-based ethics is not devoid of critical thinking, yet it is humble about all rational formulations. The confidence to be found in a Spirit-based ethics is rooted in its persistent openness and constant search for "REALITY-near" formulations of practical ethical guidelines.