

**Third Forum on Human Development  
*Cultural Identity, Democracy and Global Equity*  
Paris, 17th January 2005**

**WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A HUMAN BEING?**

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**1**

Forty years ago, Thomas Nagel published a famous paper in *The Philosophical Review*, called "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" The question I want to ask is: what is it like to be a *human being*? This may sound like an easier matter to settle than the investigation of bats, but it too is a hard question. Indeed, many intellectual battles have been fought on matters that have a direct bearing on this enquiry. I will argue that our understanding of human development in general, and of the demands of "cultural identity, democracy and global equity" in particular (the subject of this conference), depends greatly on how we answer this central question.

As it happens, Tom Nagel's paper was also really about human beings, and only marginally about bats. He argued powerfully against the cogency of trying to understand consciousness and mental phenomena by trying to reduce them to physical phenomenon (as is attempted by many philosophers), and in particular, he differentiated the *nature* of consciousness from the *connections* - causal or associative - that may link it to bodily operations. My lecture, I must hasten to explain, is not about consciousness - of human beings or of bats. I expect this might come as a relief to the audience: the prospect of listening to an economist pontificating on consciousness can be, I expect, no less alarming than hearing a bull on how exactly to behave in a China shop.

Complex as the nature of consciousness is, it is not the only difficult problem in dealing with the identity of human beings. Indeed, it is worth recollecting, in the context of this Human Development Forum, that the point of departure of what may be called the human development approach is to see human beings in terms of their well-being and freedom, and this differs sharply from an approach to development that concentrates on people's incomes, wealth and commodity possessions. When, fifteen years ago in 1989, many of us joined Mahbub ul Haq to help him launch the annual *Human Development Reports*, we were not only involved in looking for indicators of development that were less commodity-

centred and more concerned with the actual lives of human beings, we were also, in effect, trying to address, in a modest way, the underlying question: what is it like to be a human being? Should we see human deprivation just in terms of having a low income, low commodity holdings? Or, should we look instead at the lack of some elementary capabilities that we have reason to value (such as having the ability to be adequately nourished, to avoid escapable morbidity and premature mortality, to be literate and numerate, to take part in the life the community, and so on). Income is one influence on our capabilities, but there are others. Also, the conversion of income into capability must depend on a variety of contingent circumstances, for example whether a person is disease-prone or lives in a region with frequent epidemics, whether there are schools in the neighbourhood, and so on.

## 2

The initial focus of the human development approach was particularly on those capabilities that are quite universally sought across the world, for example the ability to live long, without illness and pain, the ability to read and write, and so on. There may be subtle differences here too between one society and another, but there is considerable uniformity in the values involved in the prizing of these very elementary capabilities. However, in recent works on the human development approach, the investigation of relevant capabilities has been substantially broadened to pay attention to variations of cultures, beliefs and particular styles of living. The pointer to "cultural identity" in the title of this Forum acknowledges the importance of the cultural aspects of human life in which differences flourish between one society and another, and between different communities within the same broadly defined society.

It is in fact perfectly natural to consider cultural freedom within the list of capabilities that human beings have reason to value. While we have good reason to shun some generally nasty ways of living, for example the lives that have been imposed on, say, the prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, we do have different traditions and priorities in many other matters of day-to-day living and cultural practice. The inclusion of cultural freedom in the last *Human Development Report* - that for 2004 – was, therefore, a substantial extension of the range of coverage of human development analysis.

With continued focus on capabilities and freedoms, the human development approach suggests that we view cultural considerations in a somewhat different perspective from the ones that have tended to be emphasized in the extensive

literature on the value of multiculturalism. Two clarifications about the prizing of cultural freedom within a human development approach may, in fact, be useful.

First, the focus on cultural freedom has to be distinguished from the celebration of every form of cultural inheritance, irrespective of whether the persons involved would choose those particular forms given an adequate knowledge of other options and of the choices that actually exist. Even though there has been much discussion in recent years about the role of cultures and civilizations, the focus has tended to be not so much on the importance of *cultural freedom*, but rather on the need to recognise - and even to exalt - *cultural conservation*. In contrast, in the human development approach, rather than glorifying unreasoned endorsement of inherited traditions, the focus is on the importance of freedom in cultural spheres (as in other spheres of human living), and on the ways and means of defending and expanding the cultural freedoms that people can enjoy. The critical issue is not just the particular significance of traditional culture, but the far-reaching importance of cultural choices and freedoms in general.

To be sure, cultural freedom may be hampered when a society does not allow a particular community to pursue some traditional life style that members of that community would freely choose to pursue. Social suppression of particular life styles - of gays, of immigrants, of particular religious groups - is common in many countries in the world. But just as social suppression can be a denial of cultural freedom, the violation of freedom can also come from the tyranny of conformism that may make it difficult for members of a community to opt for other styles of living. *Unfreedom* can result from lack of knowledge and understanding of other cultures and alternative life styles.

To illustrate the issue involved here, as an admirer of the cultural freedoms that the British society has tended to give to people of different backgrounds and origin, I have also been a persistent and vocal critic of the official move in the United Kingdom towards consolidation and extension of faith-based schools. Rather than reducing existing state-financed faith-based schools, actually adding others to them - Muslim schools, Hindu schools and Sikh schools to pre-existing Christian ones - may sharply add to the unfreedom to which children are subjected at a time when the priority can sensibly be towards broadening the horizon of understanding and of choice for the children whose lives lie ahead of them. The problem is especially acute when new religious schools give children very little opportunity to cultivate reasoned choice and to decide how the various

components of the students' identities (related respectively to language, literature, religion, ethnicity, cultural history, scientific interests, etc.) should receive attention.

The second clarificatory remark concerns the fact that cultural identities are not people's only identities, and even within the cultural field, there are different domains of involvement, related respectively to religion, language, literature, musical taste, food habits, and many such matters. Neither is cultural identity uniquely important, nor is it a homogeneous object which subsumes the variety of distinct fields that belong, in different ways, to the general area of culture.

### 3

It is useful to analyze the way the idea of identity functions, and in particular, the overarching fact that we belong to many distinct categories, in different systems of classification. In our normal lives, we see ourselves as members of a variety of groups - we belong to all of them. The same person can be a French citizen, of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a poet, a school teacher, a geographer, a feminist, a theatre lover, an environmental activist, a tennis fan, a jazz musician, and one who is deeply committed to the view that we should try to talk to intelligent extra-terrestrial beings in outer space (preferably in French). Each of these collectivities, to all of which this person simultaneously belongs, gives her a particular - but not exclusive - identity. None of these can be taken to be the person's only identity or singular membership category. Their relative importance can vary depending on the specific context. For example, being a vegetarian can be a more important identity when going to a dinner than the person's identity as, say, a historian or a poet.

However, in many contexts, the different components of one's identity may well compete. For example, a person may have to choose the relative importance to attach to her environmental activism vis-a-vis her love of tennis, when an ecological demonstration clashes with a promising match. One has to decide how to deal with alternative claims on one's attention and loyalty that compete with each other, and the decisions have to be circumstantial rather than categorically invariant over all different contexts. No less importantly, we have to recognise that identity cannot be only a matter of "discovery" (as communitarian philosophers often claim); it is a matter of choice as well.

It is possible that the often-repeated belief that identity is a matter of "discovery" is encouraged by the fact that the choices we can make are constrained by feasibility, and sometimes the constraints are very exacting. The feasibilities will certainly depend on particular circumstances. The constraints may be especially strict in defining the extent to which we can persuade *others*, in particular, to take us to be different from what they take us to be. A Jewish person in Nazi Germany, or an African American when faced with a lynch mob in the American South, could not easily choose a different identity from the one with which others mark him or her. The freedom in choosing our identity in the eyes of others can sometimes be extraordinarily limited. This point is not in dispute.

Indeed, some times we may not, in fact, even be fully aware how others identify us, which may differ from self-perception. I find it instructive to recollect an old Italian story - from the 1920s - with an interesting moral. It concerns a political recruiter from the Fascist Party trying to persuade a rural socialist that he should join the Fascist Party instead. "How can I join the Fascist party?" said the rural socialist. "My father was a socialist. My grandfather was a socialist. I cannot really join the Fascist Party." "What kind of an argument is this?" said the Fascist recruiter, exasperated by the rural bloke's naivety. "What would you have done," he asked, "if your father had been a murderer and your grandfather had also been a murderer? What would have done then?" "Ah, then," said the rural fool, "then, of course, I would have joined the Fascist Party."

Third-party conceptions of a person may allow very little freedom to the person to change his or her image. Some times even first-person views of oneself may be quite severely restricted by one's circumstances. Indeed, whether we are considering our identities as we ourselves see them, or as others see us, we have to choose within particular constraints. But this is not a surprising fact. Rather, it is just the way choices are faced in any situation. Choices of all kinds in every field are always made within particular constraints, and this is perhaps the most elementary aspect of any choice. For example, even in elementary economics the theory of consumer's choice does not deny the existence of a budget constraint, but studies how choices are made *within* that constraint. What is true in elementary economics is also true in complex political and social decisions. Even when one is inescapably seen as Jewish, or African American, or (particularly in the context of the present turmoil) as an Arab or as a Muslim, one still has to decide what exact importance to attach to that identity over the relevance of other categories to which one also belongs.

There is, in fact, no historical reason why the champions of Arab or Muslim heritage have to concentrate specifically on religious beliefs only, and not also on science and mathematics, to which the Arab and Muslim societies have contributed so much in the past and which can also be part of Arab or Muslim identity. Even today, when a modern mathematician in, say, *Ecole Normale Supérieure* invokes an "algorithm" to solve a difficult computational problem, she helps to commemorate the contributions of the ninth-century Arab mathematician, Al-Khwarizmi, from whose name the term algorithm is derived (the term "algebra" comes from his book, "Al Jabr wa-al-Muqabilah"). Despite the importance of this Arab heritage, crude civilizational classifications have tended to put science and mathematics in the basket of "Western science," leaving other civilizations to mine their pride in religious depths. The non-Western activists, then, focus on those issues that divide them from the West (such as religious beliefs, local customs and cultural specificities), rather than on those things that reflect global interactions (including science, mathematics, literature, and so on).

The exercise of cultural freedom without closing options is both a right and a duty. It is a significant human right to decide what importance to attach to one's cultural background and also to determine the relative importance of some particular cultural identity vis-a-vis the membership of other groups to which a person belongs. For example, the separation of Bangladesh from the rest of Pakistan was connected not with religion, which both the populations largely shared, but with the importance of the Bengali language and literature as well as political beliefs.

What we have to resist is the imposition of identities - particularly belligerent identities - on us by others who want us to do something. We may be suddenly told that we are Hutus and "we hate Tutsis." Or that we are Serbs and "cannot tolerate Albanians." These arguments may appeal to our instinctive sense of belonging and identity to some particular group, but there are other competing identities. A Rwandan Hutu who is being pressed to act against Tutsis has to think also about the fact that he is, in addition to being a Hutu, a Rwandan, an African, and a human being. To ignore the role of decision when choices exist is not only an epistemic mistake, it can be the source of a major ethical failure.

The importance of democracy relates to the issue of identity in more than one way. First, as Aristotle had discussed, political participation can be extremely important for people - it can even be seen to be an essential part of human life in society. No matter how important other aspects of culture may be, our role as citizens of a country, or indeed our self-understanding as a part of humanity, has a constant presence, and it can be altogether ignored only through an arbitrary surgery.

Second, while democracy is often seen as just an arrangement for voting, it is broadly speaking a system of public reasoning - what is sometimes called "government by discussion." The democratic arena can be a good ground for discussing the claims of different demands that compete for our attention. In determining the relative importance of different capabilities, including cultural freedoms of distinct kinds, as well as the freedom to live in peace, prosperity and health, participatory discussion must have a central position, and this applies to the general discipline of human development as well.

Third, while democracy is sometimes taken to be a quintessentially Western concept (a part of a Western identity), the global history of public reasoning - of government by discussion - is much longer and much more widespread across the world. There can, of course, be no doubt at all that the modern concepts of democracy and of public reasoning have been very deeply influenced by European Enlightenment, including what happened right here, in France in the eighteenth century. But to extrapolate backwards from that comparatively recent history to construct a quintessential and long-run dichotomy between the West and non-West would be extremely misleading.

For example, some of the earliest open general meetings aimed specifically at settling disputes between different points of view took place in India in the so-called Buddhist "councils," from the sixth century BCE onwards, where adherents of different points of view got together to argue out their differences. To consider another historical example, in early seventh century Japan, "the constitution of seventeen articles" promulgated in 604 AD by the Buddhist Prince Shotoku, insisted: "Decisions on important matters should not be made by one person alone. They should be discussed with many." This, as it happens, is six hundred years earlier than the *Magna Carta* signed in the thirteenth century. Similarly, Akbar, the great Moghal - and Muslim - emperor of India, not only arranged systematic discussion between holders of different religions in the capital city of Agra, he insisted on the need for such dialogue. This was between 1590 and

1600, when Inquisitions were flourishing in Europe. Giardino Bruno was burnt at the stake in Campo dei Fiori in Rome even as Akbar was lecturing on tolerance and the need for dialogue in Agra.

The Western world does not have any proprietary right over democratic ideas, and so the frequently aired debate on whether or not to "impose" democracy on the non-Western world is itself partly a reflection of Western arrogance. As Alexis de Tocqueville noted, in 1835, in his classic book on democracy, while the "great democratic revolution," which he observed taking place in America, could be seen, from one point of view, as "a new thing," it could also be seen, from a broader perspective, as a part of "the most continuous, ancient, and permanent tendency known to history." In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela describes how influenced he was, as a young boy, by seeing the democratic nature of the proceedings of the local meetings that were held in his African home town:

*Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard, chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and laborer.*

Mandela's quest for democracy and freedom did not emerge from any Western "imposition." The integration of the importance of democracy in the human development approach is a reassertion of the relevance of different elements of human history.

5

Finally, I should say a few words on the large and difficult subject of global equity. The world in which we live is both remarkably prosperous and thoroughly miserable, where a massive command over resources, knowledge and technology go hand in hand with the rugged presence of extraordinary deprivation and staggering inequality. An astonishing number of children are ill-nourished, ill-cared, illiterate and needlessly ill, with millions perishing every week from diseases that can be completely eliminated, or at least prevented from killing people with abandon.

The severity of the global divisions would seem to militate against any notion that we are - or can be - influenced by any effective sense of a global

identity, the identity of all human beings living anywhere in the world. If we are really so close, then how can we be so distant? It might also appear that a disbelief in global solidarity is well reflected in the protest movements of so-called "anti-globalization" activists. Moved by the thesis that global relations are primarily antagonistic and adversarial, rather than mutually supportive, it is natural to ask for reduced globalization - indeed be "anti-globalization" - in the interest of the underdogs of the world.

There are two difficulties with this way of understanding the phenomenon of anti-globalization protests. The first concerns identity and the second the phenomenon of globalization. If a sense of global identity is sheer nonsense, then why are the "anti-globalization" protesters so upset about global inequality? Why should people from one part of the world worry about the fact that people in other parts of the world are having a "raw deal"? The anti-globalization movement is in fact a global phenomenon, both in terms of the subject of its concern, and in terms of participation. The protesters come from all over the world - they are not just local inhabitants of Seattle or Washington or Genoa - and they gather together to protest about what they see as serious iniquity or injustice that plagues the people of the world. Indeed, the anti-globalization movement is perhaps the most globalized moral movement in the world today.

The second issue concerns the identification of the nature of the problems which form the subject matter of these protests. The principal challenge, I would submit, relates not to globalization as such, but to inequality - international as well as intranational. The inequalities that irk concern disparities in affluence, and also gross asymmetries in political, social and economic opportunities and power. The issue of inequality relates centrally to the disputes over globalization. A crucial question concerns the sharing of the potential gains from globalization, between rich and poor countries, and between different groups within a country.

There is need for more clarity in formulating the distributional questions that have to be asked. Economic conservatives often argue that the poor, who participate in trade and exchange, are not typically getting poorer. Since they are getting richer through being involved in the global economy, ergo - the argument runs - globalization is not unfair to the poor: they too benefit. This argument misses the central point. When there are gains from cooperation, there can be many different - many alternative - arrangements that benefit each party compared with no cooperation. It is necessary, therefore, to ask whether the distribution of gains is fair or acceptable, and not just whether there exist some

gain for all parties (which can be the case for a great many alternative arrangements).

As J.F. Nash, the mathematician and game theorist, discussed more than half a century ago (in a paper called "The Bargaining Problem" published in *Econometrica* in 1950, a paper that was among his writings that were cited by the Royal Swedish Academy in awarding him the Nobel Prize in economics), in the presence of gains from cooperation, the central issue is not whether a particular arrangement is better for all than no cooperation (there are many such alternatives), but whether that was a fair division of the benefits. This draws attention to the need to reexamine the conditions of trade and exchange, including inequitable and sometimes highly inefficient patent laws, the exclusion of products of poorer countries from the markets in rich economies, and so on. The criticism that a distributional arrangement from cooperation is unfair cannot be rebutted by just noting that all the parties are better off than would be the case in the absence of cooperation.

For example, to argue that a particularly unequal and sexist family arrangement is unfair, it does not have to be shown that women would have done comparatively better had there been no families at all, but only that the sharing of the benefits of the family system is seriously unequal in that particular arrangement. The issue on which many of the debates have concentrated, to wit, whether the poor too benefit from the established economic order, is inadequately probing - indeed it is ultimately the wrong question. It has to be asked whether they can benefit more and can have a fairer deal. This requires critical scrutiny of the need for changes in domestic economic policies (both in poor countries and rich ones) and working towards a more reasonable international division of the enormous benefits of globalization. That is where the real issue lies. It is not a question of whether the poor are getting marginally poorer or richer.

## 6

I must end by thanking the organizers of this conference, the French Government, in particular Minister Barnier and Deputy Minister Darcos and the UNDP, Mark Malloch Brown is here, and especially President Chirac, for hosting this intellectual exchange. It is a particularly pleasurable occasion for me. My main field of work has been in social choice theory, which had its origin in France - in Paris in particular - in the eighteenth century, through the contributions of a number of French mathematicians, in particular Condorcet and Borda.

**Social choice theory is a technical discipline, but underlying it is the motivation for exploring how a society of many human beings can live together and decide together. This broadly speaking is also the challenge of human development. And that interactive existence is also, I would argue, part of what it is like to be a human being. The interactive life need not be one of economic, social or cultural poverty if we give reason its due in the interactions we choose. That is the big challenge in front of us.**

**NOTES**

**\*The distinction was discussed, with illustrations, in my *Commodities and Capabilities* (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1985), and also in *Human Development Report 1990* (New York: UNDP, 1990).**

**\* Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated into English by George Lawrence (Chicago, Ill: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1990).**

**\* Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1994), p. 21.**