A personal philosophy of meaning and value essay sample

Summary and Application Plan

Most people, particularly in the turbulent years of adolescence and young adulthood, spend a great amount of time in search of meaning and value of life. On reflection, I could confidently say that I have transcended that stage, as meaning and value for me are clear and my goals seem to be more attainable once I strive hard to apply meaning and value to it. My approach to life can be described as one of relevance and practicality. This is not to imply that I hold a simply utilitarian view of things but rather that I am an action-oriented person who prefers to get things done.

In our culture, labor is held in high esteem and though knowledge is also prized, the pursuit of higher learning is left to those who are deemed suitable for studies. For the average Mongolian, meaning and value are intertwined with what one could accomplish in one's life – earning a living, success in a trade, the raising of a family, good standing in the community… Happiness and contentment is a result of achieving these things. Then of course there are those who find meaning and value in the pursuit of learning, and these individuals once they finish their training are also respected and expected to play a significant roe in the community.

I am privileged to have had the opportunity to pursue higher studies, and my encounter with philosophy has been quite fascinating and worthwhile. Philosophy is an interesting body of learning yet I have to admit that in all humility I myself am not much of a philosopher in the mold of Aristotle, Descartes, Lacan, Derrida or Nietzsche. Perhaps my own upbringing is a factor, as well as the culture of my home country Mongolia which is markedly

different from Western nations. Meaning and value in Mongolian culture is different from those of Western societies.

In fact, I would not have learned about Western philosophy if I did not pursue an education. Mongolia is a developing country, and as such its values, belief-systems and traditions are old-fashioned by Western standards. Because only a small part of Mongolia is urbanized, life in my home country could be generally described as ' simple,' laid-back and traditional. And due to the fact that Mongolia has yet to fully develop itself into an industrialized country, meaning and value for me lies in doing my part to help my country achieve development.

With such a lofty goal in mind, it would prove beneficial to have a theory to guide one to action, in order to actualize one's goals. For most people, their lives are guided by certain philosophies which help shape their perceptions of the world. The Western world in particular is rich in philosophical traditions from the ancient Greeks to its modern-day thinkers. It is worth noting that for us in the East we also have philosophical traditions we are proud of and shared by different people around the world, such as Confucianism and Taoism in China, the doctrines of Buddhism, among others. Thus Eastern cultures are not inferior to their Western counterparts.

The 21 st century appears to be quite promising for mankind. As Goldman (1999, Vii) notes, we are at what could either be the best or the worst of times for the social pursuit of knowledge, exulting in the fact that humanity is so much better endowed with information and knowledge nowadays than it was even dreamed possible. A social theory of knowledge or *epistemology*

has traditionally preserved " the Cartesian image of inquiry as an activity of isolated thinkers, each pursuing truth in a spirit of individualism and pure self-reliance (Goldman, Vii)." This however, " ignores the interpersonal and institutional contexts in which most knowledge endeavors are actually undertaken" (Goldman 1993, Vii), that is, the significant role of social interactions which both brighten and threaten the prospects for knowledge. Epistemology is currently being undermined by the emergent discourse on " postmodernism" which downplays what the epistemological tradition has painstakingly built up throughout its history – man's quest for truth – with its denial of the intelligibility of objective truth.

I however for one agree with Goldman on the significance of the philosophical tradition and social practices as having both positive and negative contributions to human knowledge. Going back to the humble beginnings of Western philosophy, we have Aristotle proclaiming that " All men by nature desire to know" (Aristotle as cited in Goldman 1999, 3). Human history bears witness to man's pursuit of knowledge and information. This in turn is not merely an outcome of our fascination with the world we find ourselves in but due to human curiosity endowed by nature and our own practical concerns.

Following Goldman (1999, 5) in social epistemology, the orientation is towards truth determination in the production of knowledge and its contraries, i. e. *error* (false belief) and *ignorance* (absence of truth belief). With the postmodern turn in the later part of the 20 th century, truth-based

epistemology has come under fire from its postmodern critics. Goldman (1999, 9) presents the general critique of truth-based epistemology:

"(1) There is not such thing as a transcendent truth for what we call " true" is simply what we agree with. Furthermore, these so-called truths or facts are merely negotiated beliefs, the products of social construction and fabrication, not ' objective' or ' external' features of the world. (2) Knowledge, reality, and truth are the products of language, and there is no language-independent reality that can make our thoughts true or false. (3) If there were any transcendent or objective truths, they would be inaccessible and unknowable by human beings, therefore unavailable for any practical epistemological purposes. (4) There are no privileged epistemic positions, and no certain foundations for beliefs. All claims are judged by conventions or language games, which have no deeper grounding. (5) This would imply the absence of neutral, trans-cultural standards for settling disagreements. Appeals to truth are merely instruments of domination or repression, which should be replaced by practices with progressive social value. (6) Truth cannot be attained because all putatively truth-oriented practices are corrupted and biased by politics or self-serving interests" (Goldman 1999, 9).

Going through these general points of contention directed at truth-based epistemology, one would notice that postmodernism, particularly its social constructivist aspect, seems to be preoccupied with language as the determiner of both knowledge and reality. We have Jacques Derrida proclaiming that " The text is all and nothing exists outside of it" (Derrida as cited in Goldman, 1999, 10). If one adhered to this principle of assertions of

truth as never independent of language, then truth is only conferred by the world as constructed by mankind.

Though I do agree that our ideas are based on our own resources (natural and human) and in this way we " create" the world as we know it, ultimately human knowledge involves " truth" which I agree with Goldman is not simply a human construct. My own personal philosophy recognizes the creative, dynamic, social constructionist component of human beings as they engage in various activities within the spheres of social life. A relativist conception of truth however, as what many postmodernists appear to be advocating, does not appeal much to me.

Though I recognize the plurality of cultures existing in the world, I think there are certain " truths" people could agree on despite this recognized plurality and variety in human experiences and socio-historical realities. On a personal note, my own ethics tend to reflect those which are of prime importance in my own value system. This in turn is influenced by the culture I grew up in, and my own socialization and upbringing. In relation to my personal life, my ethics have a distinct individualist aspect to it as it also reflects my personal beliefs, goals and inspirations incorporated into the dominant value system of the various socio-cultural groups to which I belong.

Specifically, though I have high respect for traditional values and beliefs, having been exposed to higher education has ' freed' me from blindly accepting tradition. This freedom brought about by learning and exposure to other cultures allows me to be able to critically question and subject to

critical analysis those which are commonly taken for granted. This critical questioning and analytical re-evaluation is not the outcome of a mere desire to show off higher learning or as an end in itself. Rather, it is undertaken with a sense of development, of finding better solutions, of improving the already existing state of affairs in mind. It is thus geared towards problem-solving and improvement.

Having been exposed to other cultures – I studied for several years in Japan – a very significant and useful experience for me, I have learned to appreciate human diversity and to respect other people and their cultures. Peaceful coexistence and cooperation is indeed possible yet the manner of achieving it may differ from one experience to another. Different solutions exist for different peoples but it all boils down to finding the best one for you. My initial encounter with Japanese society was one of culture shock, before I learned to adjust to the new, vastly different environment. It was truly an eye-opening experience for me wherein I learned to assess my own society through the perspective of another people, another race, another culture.

But it does not mean that just because people are molded by different cultures there is no common " truth" they could all believe and agree on. Whether I am in Japan or in Mongolia it does not alter the fact that the sun always rises on the east and sets in the West – though it is worth noting that " east" and " west" are social constructs facilitated by language. Another French thinker, a psychoanalyst by the name of Jacques Lacan suggests that " words convey multiple meanings we use to signify something different from the concrete meaning, i. e. language as autonomous from its signifier" (Sarup 1993, 9).

I tend to agree with Lacan that there is " no human subject without language but the subject cannot be reduced to language" (Sarup 1993, 9), i. e. the ability to speak distinguishes the subject, effectively separating the social from the natural, external world. Because of this vital property of language in a way that it is our sole means of communicating to others, we cannot escape language in our daily lives. Lacan appeals to me as his ideas provide insights on how we could possible link the issues of choice and individual responsibility. For Sarup (1993) however, Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the self " remained within Cartesianism as its psychology tended to portray the individual as a rational, conscious actor who could not understand the basis for his or her action... firmly rooted in a philosophy of individual autonomy and rational choice" (Sarup 1999, 5-6).

Viewed this way, Lacanian psychoanalysis is an " attempt of reconciling existentialism and Marxism" (Sarup 1993, 5) through which he presents the view that " there is no separation between self ad society, i. e. human beings become social with the appropriation of language as language constitutes us as a subject, i. e. society inhabits each individual" (Sarup 1993, 6). Lacanian psychoanalysis has significantly influence my own personal philosophy because while it stresses the dynamic, creative aspect of human beings as subject, it does not ignore the large scale systems of interpretations which ultimately influence and constrain the actions of man.

Like Lacan, I too think that social phenomena has certain meanings which could either be culturally distinct or universal, and the development and application of the social sciences (even philosophy) to human experience greatly allows man to understand those meanings. We have the philosopher

Bertrand Russell (cited in Solomon 2003, 3) proclaiming the " joy of Philosophy" in its " richness and variety." In line with the incorporation of Lacanian ideas in my personal philosophy, I also refer to Solomon (2003) that in a similar line to that of the German philosopher Hegel, " philosophy does not need to be abstract… there is concrete philosophy that lives in the details, in the flesh-and-blood dialectic of ideas" (Solomon 2003, 4).

Another admirable and interesting German philosopher in the postmodern tradition, Friedrich Nietzsche, suggests that there is a curious " will to truth" (Nietzsche as cited in Solomon 2003, 11) but as Solomon (2003) points out, philosophy (like social science), needs to also concern itself with man's re-occurring problems. I have to agree with this because in my own experience, philosophy should not only be the domain of academicians and intellectual elites. Matters such as the " human condition," " the good life," " justice" and " being" are for Solomon, " preexisting philosophical conditions… about which we have no choice but to think and feel" (1993, 11).

I do think that here lies the significance of certain philosophies of life which could hopefully guide people towards self-knowledge and understanding in this world of trivialities, consumerism and pluralities. My own personal philosophy attempts to reconcile the novel insights of postmodernism, particularly its social constructivist component, with philosophy as a heuristic device to aid man in his quest for knowledge, comprehension of the world and happiness in life. Though personal philosophies might differ in detail, scope and conception from one culture to another, basically it is an attempt of man towards an understanding of himself and the world he lives in.

Aided by a view of personal philosophy as a heuristic tool, in broad terms what I aim to achieve is something which would be of use not only to me but to my people as well. In the short-run, I plan to finish my studies before I devote myself full time to business development and being an entrepreneur in my own country. As I am one of the relatively few Mongolians fortunate enough to have received a good education, I want to give back something to my own countrymen, to serve my country in my own way. With my experience in the business sector, it seems a rational decision to make my mark in the business world.

Information technology (IT) is a fast expanding field due to the great advancements in science and technology. Mongolia is a poor country and if we hope to fully develop our economy, there is a need to invest in technology and industries. With my training and experience in information technology, I aim to help jumpstart the IT industry in my country and eventually establish a global software company based in Mongolia. The choice of venturing into IT is partly due to my own interest and involvement in the field. I am currently the Chief Executive Officer of a small Mongolian software company whose market is largely geared towards the Japanese market.

The long-term goal is for our company to go global and expand into other markets, though it would be headquartered in my home country, in a model adapted from that of California's Silicon Valley. Mongolia stands to benefit from more business investments for it to develop its infrastructure and facilitate industrialization. Though having not much mineral resources which

could spur its drive towards industrialization, my country's wealth ultimately lies in its people.

Mongolia has a talented pool of young people who are eager to study and learn. A well-educated, skilled work force holds the key towards succeeding in the IT industry. Taking our cue from the Chinese, labor in Mongolia can be maximized if the government would invest on its labor force. Such an investment necessitates providing adequate social services, education and skills training for its population, and facilitating a healthy business climate conducive for investments and the setting up of industries.

I for one recognize the need to invest in research and development (R&D), expensive as it is, in order to improve and develop new products and continuously revolutionize the market, to develop industry's full productive forces. The manner of how to do so is yet another challenge. This is certainly not an easy undertaking but just because it is a difficult problem does not mean that a solution does not exist for it. The key is continuous creation, modification and re-invention until one develops the solution which ' works.' It is not enough to simply imitate what other nations have done and apply it to your country because your own culture, socio-historical circumstances and the concrete experiences of your people are different and distinct. One has to develop a distinct approach towards analysis and solving problems, aided by the experiences of others, into a specific method which ' works for you.'

Failure should not be a cause for desperation but rather viewed as a challenge, an impulsion to work harder, to better one's self, both at the individual and national levels, until the appropriate solution is arrived at.

Because Mongolia is still largely a traditional society, there is reason to believe that most of the people might be afraid and apprehensive of change, particularly of the scale and magnitude of those accompanying the shift from traditionalism to modernity and industrialization. In order to counter such irrational fears, education would help liberate the people from ignorance and superstition.

Education would also open their eyes to other cultures and experiences, for new kinds of knowledge, acquaint them with what an increasingly global world has to offer. A positive outcome of educating the populace would hopefully lead to greater appreciation of our own distinct culture while developing respect for those of other cultures and other peoples. It is said that ignorance builds distrust and intolerance which I think is not healthy in a world that is already ' shrinking' due to globalization. Different nations, different peoples, different cultures yet in the last analysis all of us are human beings.

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