

## How Can We Sustainably Govern Ourselves?

### *Balancing the Attributes of Human Nature and the Requirements for Human Dignity*

#### *8.1 The Ever-Present Tension*

Today's political, social and security landscape is shaped by unprecedented complexity. Now, more than ever, the lives and futures of individuals around the world are interconnected and interdependent.<sup>1</sup> From the Black Lives Matter protests to the variety of measures taken worldwide to combat the Covid-19 pandemic, to the turmoil surrounding the 2020 elections in the United States, it is evident that political tensions and societal instability are not a thing of the past, even in democratic societies.

As I made clear in the first part of this book, contemporary neuroscience has suggested that human nature is primarily emotional, amoral and egoistic. Not only do human beings possess an innate desire to survive, but their motivation to fulfil the Neuro P5 means that our actions are guided, at least for the most part, by our perceived emotional self-interest, and not necessarily by rationality or moral principles. Since our emotions are deeply involved in our decision making, we are vulnerable to manipulation by those who appeal to our emotions as a means of

pursuing their own agendas, both personally and politically.<sup>2</sup> Ancient, modern and contemporary history has largely been driven by events – above all, wars – in which human beings acted impulsively, selfishly, out of fear and with disregard for the well-being of others. Social and political tensions will continue to develop where decisions are made without the awareness that our lives and futures are intrinsically connected with each other, as is the case, for instance, with the selfish disregard shown by many across the world for the lives of others during the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Choosing not to comply with social distancing measures on the basis that we believe ourselves not to be high-risk not only puts the lives of the people near us on the line, but also helps to prolong the pandemic with all its resulting restrictions and attendant risk of new virus variants.<sup>4</sup> Numerous interests are at stake and divisive survival instincts are increasingly pushing people to make choices and support policy decisions which they believe would benefit themselves in the short term, irrespective of the consequences they may have for others and even for themselves in the long term. As neuroscience suggests, we should not take for granted the capacity to clearly distinguish between right and wrong, especially when human beings are confronted with fear, deprivation, humiliation and insecurity.<sup>5</sup> When facing these challenges, our survival instincts will prevail and guide us towards emotional decision making which prioritises our survival and narrow self-interest above all else.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, in the coming decades, our emotionality, amorality and egoism will only be compounded by emerging ordeals for humankind, such as climate change, technological advances and shifts in population and power. In this context, the world as we know it today faces dramatic changes.<sup>7</sup> Not only will it become increasingly interdependent, but political, economic and cultural inequalities are bound to increase.<sup>8</sup> This will aggravate social grievances and tensions, and local and global competition for resources. In this context, it will become increasingly harder to preserve the peace, security and prosperity necessary for humanity to progress sustainably.

In light of these considerations, it is of fundamental importance that we take human nature into account (without reductionism or determinism) when examining the past, present and future path of humanity. If we are to arrange our collective life in a way that can successfully unlock humanity's positive potential, and to ensure dignity for all, under all circumstances and in all places, we must acknowledge who we are and what we need to be able to thrive. Indeed, prevailing norms and environmental practices will significantly impact people's

regard for the well-being of others when making decisions. As I argue in this chapter, a sustainable history in which we can achieve sustainable improvements in the condition of all human beings can only unfold in a context which enables us to reconcile the ever-present tension between the requirements for human dignity and the emotional amoral egoism innate within us all. By 'dignity' I do not refer to the mere absence of humiliation, nor exclusively to the inherent worth of every human being. Rather, I use the term to encompass the set of nine universal and timeless requirements for human dignity: reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation and inclusiveness. In turn, these nine requirements for dignity, the reader will recall, comprise the first of the eight prerequisites for sustainable history, the second of which is dignity-based national and global governance. In this chapter I introduce the concept of good governance and identify dignity-based governance as a new good governance paradigm. Only dignity-based governance is capable of (1) assuaging vitriolic human emotionality (by providing security, safeguarding human rights and fostering a society based on reason); (2) countering human amorality (with justice, accountability and transparency); and (3) channelling human egoism (to benefit society through opportunity, inclusiveness and innovation).

## 8.2 *The Concept of Good Governance*

The concept of good governance first began to be deployed in the development community in the early 1990s after the end of the Cold War as a way of encouraging institutional reform in countries receiving development aid.<sup>9</sup> Its attractiveness to policymakers stemmed from its focus on political processes in the context of broader structures. As such, it seemed capable of linking political and administrative spheres, and also appeared to provide neutral criteria on which to base reforms. As a concept, however, it is extremely vague.<sup>10</sup> Governance is not synonymous with government.<sup>11</sup> The term *good governance* has been employed in different ways and for different purposes, but it has generally been used to refer to the exercise of authority within a specific domain and to denote efficient management.<sup>12</sup> International financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the IMF, emphasise in their definitions of governance the way resources are used to promote political power and development. The World Bank, for instance, has defined governance as:

the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised. This includes the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced; the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies; and the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them.<sup>13</sup>

This definition highlights the role of governments.<sup>14</sup> The UNDP, on the other hand, has defined governance differently, as:

the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels. It comprises mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences.<sup>15</sup>

What is important to note is that, in this definition, not only the state, but also the private sector and civil society are considered important actors in governance. The role of the state is to provide a legal framework within which civil society institutions can flourish and facilitate the participation of individuals and groups in politics.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, the UNDP's definition also allows for both formal and informal actors to shape decision making and the implementation of decisions. In addition, the UNDP definition recognises that governance may take place in the institutional, local, national or global spheres.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the concept of governance may be conceived as a new approach to the notion of governing, in which the boundaries between public, private and non-profit sectors are unclear.<sup>18</sup>

The concept of good governance, according to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), has eight major facets: participation, the rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, a consensus-oriented approach, equity and inclusiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, and accountability.<sup>19</sup> According to the 2002 UNDP Human Development Report, good governance depends on building the appropriate institutions, which may be achieved by creating an environment in which participation can take place through representation via political parties and elections, promoting the participation of minorities and women, developing electoral systems and limiting the influence of money in politics. Strengthening checks on power and the

separation of power between the executive, the judiciary and parliament are considered vital, as is the creation of independent bodies. In this report, the UNDP also recommended decentralisation through the devolution of power from the central government to provinces and villages, supported by local democratic institutions and practices. It also considered the development of a free and independent media to be essential.<sup>20</sup>

Some view good governance as synonymous with democratic governance.<sup>21</sup> Democratic governance entails efficient institutions, a stable economic and political environment, and effective public services. However, democratic governance is also concerned with political and human rights, as well as the elimination of discrimination. Reforms aimed at democratic governance involve the establishment of rules and institutions that are efficient, just and conceived as a result of an inclusive democratic process in which everyone has a voice. Democratic governance therefore implies a concern with good governance for development, democratic processes and institutions, and securing political and civil rights as well as human rights.<sup>22</sup> Democratic governance may thus be distinguished from general good governance in that it is based on the premise that political and civil freedoms and participation are essential for development.<sup>23</sup> Regular, free and fair elections, for example, are thought to encourage responsiveness from a governing elite. Democracy, it is argued, also allows citizens to monitor elected officials and influence the policy-making process through civil society institutions. In addition, increased public participation in the political debate may endow governments with a greater degree of legitimacy.<sup>24</sup> I expand on these arguments and on the relationship between democracy and good governance in the next chapter.

Despite the widespread employment of the term *good governance*, its promotion has had a mixed record. The reforms associated with the concept which were recommended in the early 2000s by bodies such as the UNDP to countries seen as experiencing 'poor governance' were not always adopted as hoped. Not only did the vagueness of the concept arguably contribute to the lack of efficacy of the measures adopted, but the types of reforms required by the set of standards identified implied changes to existing power relations and affected those with stakes in local political contexts. Naturally, since very few people who experience power are willing to let it go (see Chapter 4), there was deliberate opposition to the suggested reforms in countries such as Uganda, where the authoritarian government in power at the time argued that political pluralism was a product of Western culture and therefore not applicable outside the West.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, as I discuss in detail in the next section and in Chapter 9, there are essential features of good governance

which can and ought to be applied across the globe irrespective of the official name attributed to that particular form of government. Rather than focus exclusively on political freedoms, or ideas of democracy and development, in my view, good governance should focus on something else entirely: human dignity.

### 8.3 *Dignity-Based Governance*

As I have argued, human beings are primarily guided by emotions. We are also born *amoral* and are susceptible to the influence of the environment in which we live.<sup>26</sup> Although we lack a form of innate morality, we are a predisposed *tabula rasa* geared towards survival and are, consequently, *egoistic* by nature. We are shaped by our environment. In situations of fear, danger and which threaten our survival, our emotional amoral egoism will manifest at its worst, leading us to prioritise those actions that maximise our chances of survival.<sup>27</sup> Since humankind does possess the capacity for reason and conscious reflection, however, the right environment will enable this to flourish. Good governance can play a key role in helping us make rational, moral and ethical decisions which do not benefit us at the expense of others and which can channel our emotional amoral egoism into productive enterprises aimed at serving the public good.<sup>28</sup>

So, what do I mean by ‘good governance’? First, as I discuss at length in the next chapter, despite its proven success, I do not necessarily refer to a uniform adoption of exact copies of Western models of liberal democracy.<sup>29</sup> I believe, as I have written elsewhere, that democracy ‘in its current form’ should be neither idealised nor hailed as the ‘guarantor of human thriving or ultimate harbinger of peace’.<sup>30</sup> In fact, without minimising the fact that democracy as a form of accountable governance has been very successful in practice,<sup>31</sup> in most modern democracies political freedom coexists with alienation, discrimination, injustice and marginalisation.<sup>32</sup>

In light of these considerations, good governance models should – in contrast to the practice of most democracies – prioritise human dignity and not just political freedom.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, despite the fact that dignity is, for all intents and purposes, the single best predictor of sustainable improvements in the human condition, most indexes and indicators of good governance do not consider dignity a relevant criteria in the assessment.<sup>34</sup> As I discussed in detail in Chapter 7, what I mean by dignity is not the mere ‘absence of humiliation’. Rather, I understand human dignity as being guaranteed by nine minimum criteria, specifically: reason,

security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation and inclusiveness.<sup>35</sup> In the previous chapter I also stated that the definition of each requirement for dignity must be both universal and sensitive to cultural and historical specificities without moral relativism.

Dignity-based governance is the highest form of good governance since it regards the fulfilment of our nine requirements for human dignity as being of the utmost importance. Because the ever-present tension between our emotional amoral egoism and our nine requirements for dignity must be successfully balanced if we hope to achieve sustainable progress and a prosperous future for human civilisation, dignity-based governance is the only path to a sustainable history. Most importantly, good governance which prioritises dignity for all, at all times and under all circumstances, has tangible advantages. Indeed, it is not only about doing what some may argue is ethically and morally correct, such as respecting people's human rights.<sup>36</sup> Rather, by channelling our emotional amoral egoism into productive enterprises, dignity-based governance gives rise to a more efficient government and a stronger economy, it also promotes societal cohesion, thus preventing instability via alienation and polarisation which, in the long term, may result in revolutions, violence or even terrorism and thereby compromise sustainable progress.<sup>37</sup>

I shall now explain exactly how dignity-based governance can balance the tension between our emotional amoral egoism and our nine requirements for dignity.

### *8.3.1 Balancing Emotionality with Reason, Security and Human Rights*

As I briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, of the nine dignity substrates I identified, three in particular – reason, security and human rights – can help balance the destructive potential of human emotionality.<sup>38</sup> By reason, in this context, I mean ‘the extent to which public institutions accept true facts and reasoned arguments, as opposed to deliberately spreading false information and claiming to hold the absolute monopoly on truth’ (as I have written elsewhere).<sup>39</sup> The importance of reason is two-fold. First, it is essential for the promotion of accountable governance.<sup>40</sup> Second, it also plays a key role as a fundamental safeguard against the manipulation of history.<sup>41</sup> Security is another essential requirement for assuaging human emotionality, as it limits the possibility of the fear-induced pre-emptive aggression which, as I argued in Chapter 4, is likely to arise when people do not feel secure and fear that their well-being is threatened.<sup>42</sup> Finally, since the sustainable neurochemical gratification principle requires that our basic needs must be fulfilled if we are to successfully employ reason, a commitment to human rights is also essential. Indeed, human rights are

key to satisfying basic physical and emotional needs, such as the need for a positive identity or freedom of thought, by protecting against degrading treatment and recognising the worth inherent in every human being.<sup>43</sup>

### 8.3.2 *Countering Amorality with Accountability, Transparency and Justice*

Accountability, transparency and justice are necessary to offset human amorality.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the abuse of power is prevented by public institutions being accountable and transparent. Similarly, fair and well-governed judicial systems guarantee justice, which in turn incentivises pro-social behaviour and establishes consequences to serve as deterrents for anti-social behaviour. It is also essential that the judicial system does not enforce justice relatively or in a discriminatory manner, and that it works equally for all sections of society.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, since social injustice of any kind frustrates basic needs such as access to health care, clean water, or adequate food, it is antithetical to human dignity. On the contrary, if public institutions consider the promotion of social cooperation a true priority, individuals are far more likely, as I have written, ‘to evolve a moral compass which can steer them towards more altruistic and high-minded behaviour’.<sup>46</sup> Governments must also actively promote a cosmopolitan conception of morality, which recognises that all human beings possess equal moral worth deserving of respect and concern by all others.<sup>47</sup>

### 8.3.3 *Channelling Egoism through Opportunity, Inclusiveness and Innovation*

The innate egoism of all human beings must be channelled through opportunity, inclusiveness and innovation, all of which feed individuals’ self-esteem and positive identity. Indeed, by opportunity I refer to the fact that everyone should live in circumstances conducive to their positive physical, mental and social development, irrespective of race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender or social class. All human beings should, above all, live in circumstances which enable the fulfilment of their basic needs, including access to food, housing, clothing, health care, education and basic welfare. Furthermore, our natural egoism can productively be harnessed through opportunities for professional, scientific and intellectual growth, which give rise to an innovative society. Indeed, human egoism can be constructively channelled by enabling self-expression and the fulfilment of one’s authenticity and ambition.<sup>48</sup>

Policy mechanisms aimed at eliminating inequalities and marginalisation are also necessary for the promotion of inclusiveness. Since human beings may experience resentment towards others when they feel ‘left behind’, inclusiveness is necessary to reduce the likelihood



of us giving in to our egoism at the expense of others.<sup>49</sup> Fundamentally, this requires that all public policy decisions be made by including all those affected in the decision-making process. Not only does this confer ownership, consent and therefore legitimacy on the entire process; it also plays an important role in policymaking by increasing the likelihood of policies meeting actual rather than perceived needs.<sup>50</sup> Finally, inclusiveness is necessary for the promotion of transcultural understanding, which, as I briefly mentioned in the introduction, is closely tied to the development of transcultural synergies, one of the eight necessary prerequisites for a sustainable history.

To sum up, by prioritising the requirements for human dignity, good governance can channel our human nature and our quest for sustainable neurochemical gratification and the Neuro P5, into enterprises that benefit the many and not the few. Good governance encourages human beings to associate the egoistic desire to 'feel good' with constructive behaviour that is not only beneficial to them, but also to the society in which they live and to humanity as a whole. Furthermore, when our nine requirements for dignity are satisfied, we are more likely to employ reason and engage in reflection and conscious moral behaviour. For a sustainable history to unfold, it is therefore essential that dignity-based governance be ensured on both the domestic and the global levels (see Chapters 9 and 10). It must also take into account the implications of technological developments for the future of humankind and for human nature itself.

#### *8.4 Conclusion*

Building on my theory of human nature and human dignity, this chapter has shown how, for human nature to flourish, governance models must mediate between our emotional amoral and egoistic nature and nine critical needs. Indeed, fulfilling these requirements for human dignity is the only way to ensure a lasting improvement in the human condition.<sup>51</sup> Having thus illustrated the minimum criteria for human dignity (Chapter 7) and explained how they can be reconciled with our human nature through a new form of dignity-based good governance, the following two chapters will focus on the practical implications of dignity-based governance at both the national (Chapter 9) and global (Chapter 10) levels.