

SUMMARY EXECUTIVE
“HANDBOOK ON PHILOSOPHY OF UNITY”

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Malaysia is an extraordinary, perhaps unique society, for a combination of many reasons:
- 1.2 In the 50 years since Merdeka, Malaysia has gone from being one of the poorest countries in Asia, to being one of the richest.
- 1.3 Malaysia is one of a very few Asian countries that have both achieved prosperity and reduced poverty to negligible proportions.
- 1.4 Malaysia has never had a military or other dictatorial form of government — it has been a genuine democracy since its inception.
- 1.5 Malaysia is a country of great ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, more so than any other South-East Asian country.
- 1.6 Malaysia suffered serious racial and religious violence in 1969, but it has not suffered any such incidents in the subsequent 38 years, unlike countries such as the US, UK, France, Germany, India, Sudan, Iran, Australia, Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Egypt, Lebanon, former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and many other countries of West Asia, Europe and Africa.
- 1.7 Unlike many countries, Malaysia has never suffered catastrophes such as tsunamis, cyclones, earthquakes or volcanic eruptions.

Malaysia is a nation that has succeeded in combining unity with diversity; continued efforts are needed to maintain and further promote this special combination. This includes developing a philosophical basis for diversity within unity, and that is the rationale for this Handbook on the Philosophy of Unity. However, most Malaysians are unfamiliar with philosophy because it is not taught in universities or schools. We therefore begin by briefly explaining philosophy and its concerns. In the next section we look at some of the ethical questions that philosophy can help us deal with. We move on to consider the concept of unity, noting that it is not the same as uniformity; indeed, in Malaysia unity must be understood in the context of respect for diversity. In section 4, we highlight the key factors in promoting unity, Malaysian style, including respect for reason and science, respect for religion and spiritual values, shared social values including integrity, and shared political, economic and environmental values. However, we also draw attention to features of our society that could threaten that unity and

need to be addressed: these include religious, racial and cultural intolerance and corruption. In the final section we argue that the creation and maintenance of a high degree of both diversity and unity require dialogue skills and the ability to apply critical thinking about ethics, illustrating our points with everyday examples from the media.

2.0 WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

- 2.1 Philosophy is the discipline concerned, centrally, with questions about how one should live (ethics); what sorts of things exist and what are their essential natures (metaphysics); what counts as genuine knowledge and how we can acquire it (epistemology); and what are the correct principles of reasoning (logic). Philosophers also philosophize about other belief structures and areas of inquiry. For instance, philosophy of science asks questions such as: What is distinctive about science as a way of studying the world? Why does it work? What is the status of scientific knowledge — are there timeless certainties or are scientific claims only provisional and subject to revision? Although the word "philosophy" originates in the Western tradition, many figures in the history of other cultures have addressed similar topics in similar ways.
- 2.2 The well known moral philosopher Bernard Gert (2004) sums it up as follows: "Philosophical problems arise out of the attempt to arrive at a clear, coherent, and acceptable view of the world." Clearly, the idea of coherence implies that unity is a central value in philosophy.

3.0 SCIENCE, VALUES AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

3.1 Science

Everyday questions about the present state of the world, how that state came about, and how it will change in the future.

3.2 Values

In principle, science claims to give an explanation of all observable phenomena, and scientific explanations are regarded as paradigms of how we understand nature. However, there are other questions that science cannot and does not attempt to answer. The most obvious such questions are those that involve values — questions about right and wrong, good and

evil, rights and duties, goals and ideals, and moral responsibility. Science and technology provide options from which to choose, the means to bring them about, and predictions about the results of different courses of actions; but they can't tell us which choice is morally tight. In this and the next subsection we examine some ethical issues, in a medical context. Modern medical science has provided us with many opportunities that were not available to previous generations. But along with these benefits we are also faced with problems such as life and death decision-making that previous generations did not have to deal with. Philosophy provides resources for helping us to deal with such issues.

3.3 The meaning of Life

Questions about the meaning of life are questions that go beyond both our everyday experiences and the explanatory power of science. They are important aspect of the philosophy of unity because they are questions not just about experiences or episodes but one's whole life –or the whole of life.

4.0 WHAT IS UNITY?

The idea of unity is central to world religions and many secular views:

- 4.1 According to the Buddhist Bodhisattva Maitreya, "Unity must be sought for with all diligence". Christianity teaches that there is but "one body and one spirit-one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. (Ephesians 4:3-6).
- 4.2 Muslims are taught: "And hold fast by the covenant of Allah all together and be not disunited, and remember the favour of Allah on you when you were enemies, then He united your hearts so by His favour you became brothers: and you were on the brink of a pit of tire, then He saved you from it; thus does Allah make clear to you His communications that you may follow the right way." (Qur'an 3:103)
- 4.3 The Sanskrit word "Yoga" is used to refer generally to the goal of the teachings of Hinduism; however its literal meaning is "integration" or "union," and it is derived from the root word, "yui," meaning "a yoke that unites animals together to combine their strength and control their direction" (Wiseheart 1995)

- 4.4 For Bahai, "The central theme of Baha'u'llah's message is that humanity is one single race and that the day has come for its unification in one global society...The principal challenge facing the peoples of the earth is to accept the fact of their oneness and to assist the processes of unification." (Bahai International Community webs.)
- 4.5 A UNESCO (2004) document begins: "All civilizations celebrate the unity in diversity of humankind.
- 4.6 The Indonesian national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, translates as "Unity Diversity".
- 4.7 An article on the Quaker website (Amoss 1999) states, "Love, available to all, is our Light on the way and our sole basis for unity: that is the central lesson of the Quaker experience".
- 4.8 The five Principles of Nationhood enshrined in the Rukunegara, proclaimed on August 31, 1970 were designed to strengthen national unity in Malaysia's multicultural society. Two of the goals of Rukunegara are:
- Achieving a greater unity for all her peoples
 - Ensuring a liberal approach to her rich and diverse cultural traditions.
- 4.9 All Malaysia Info site: For us as Malaysians, unity, in the sense of "oneness", is not just a simple concept of our people living together physically by residing in the same country. Nor is it the idea of all being, "the same". On the contrary, much of the strength of Malaysian society stems from its rich variety. Unity, for Malaysia, is the idea of the vision for the country that we share, the care, respect and responsibility that we have towards each other. The history of our nation even before independence has shown us how vital unity has been and still is, in our journey en route to social and economic development. It is something that we must practise in daily life to experience it ourselves. It extends from the way think about ourselves and the way we live our lives to the way we respond to the people around us and the environment.

5.0 UNITY, MALAYSIAN STYLE

Important unifying elements in Malaysia include:

- 5.1 **Respect for reason.** It is characteristic of civilized society that policy making and problem solving are seen as best dealt with by calm reasoning and dialogue and not, for instance, by violence or repression. To the extent that reason can solve problems and promote agreement, it is a powerful unifying factor. This is dealt with further below.
- 5.2 **Respect for science.** It is through science that we are able to understand the world and develop the technology to use resources for the good of all. Science seeks to explain all phenomena and their interrelatedness; thus the scientific world view is a unified one.
- 5.3 **Respect for religion and spiritual values.** While religious diversity is a potential source of conflict (discussed below) it can also be a unifying factor when people demonstrate mutual respect for other faiths. In recent years, political and community leaders have shown the way, for instance by attending each other's cultural celebrations.
- 5.4 **Shared social values.** No society can survive without a commitment to at least some common values, often expressed as ideals, goals and rules
- 5.5 **Integrity.** While this is an area in which Malaysia has some way to go (discussed later), integrity is vital to a flourishing society. Integrity is often seen as a virtue, like courage and truthfulness, but it might best be seen as a special strength of character that promotes the other virtues in all contexts, even when one is tempted to act wrongly. For instance, a politician or business person who has integrity will be honest in public as well as private life. Integrity thus promotes unity in both the character of the individual and in society.
- 5.6 **Political values.** As noted earlier, unlike other countries in the region, Malaysia is and always has been a democracy. The system of parliamentary democracy is a heritage of Britain, but it has been retained because it is how Malaysians want their society to be governed, by a government that is accountable to the people via free, fair elections. The unifying factors here are, first, that every adult gets one vote, and second,

that everyone accepts the result of an election even if the party they support is unsuccessful.

5.7 **Economic values.** Malaysia has always been committed to economic prosperity for all, and it has made astonishing progress towards this goal, with steady economic growth and some of the lowest unemployment and poverty rates in the world. No doubt this is a major factor in Malaysia's relatively low crime statistics, compared to countries where there is a large, alienated underclass.

5.8 **Environmental values.** There is increasing recognition of the value of nature, and of the need to use resources in a sustainable manner, including issues as diverse as renewable energy and ecotourism. There is also increased understanding of the interconnectedness (and therefore essential unity) of all things, a dawning realization that nature should be valued for its beauty, diversity and complexity, not merely as an economic resource.

All of these values are intertwined. For instance, environmental science is the basis for sustainability; equality and democracy are inseparable; rationality and science are two sides of the same coin. Of course, these values could conflict in particular circumstances. For example, in its early years, like other countries emerging from serious underdevelopment and poverty, Malaysia did not give a high priority to environmental protection, but that has changed.

6.0 THREATS TO UNITY, MALAYSIAN STYLE

- 6.1 Religious Intolerance
- 6.2 Racial and Cultural Intolerance
- 6.3 Corruption and Lack of Integrity

7.0 PHILOSOPHY, DIALOGUE AND CRITICAL THINKING

Dialogue skills are necessary in ethics and politics. However, dialogue is possible only if people are prepared to listen to each other and to remember that dialogue is a two-way process. Participants in dialogue also need to be prepared to investigate factual claims in an impartial manner and, to revise their opinions accordingly. Dialogue also involves skills, which are commonly referred to as critical thinking or critical reasoning. People who are not used to dialogue and do

not have such skills are more likely to try to deal with disputes in other ways, as some recent events in Malaysia suggest. Because we are committed to dialogue as the method of resolving disagreements, we propose that critical thinking be included in the educational system at all levels.

The ability to think critically is indispensable in any society (though it might be a persona liability in a dictatorship). Certainly it is needed in a modern democratic society such as Malaysia where, to repeat, we are constantly "bombarded with messages telling us what to do or not to do, what to believe or not to believe."

8.0 CONCLUSION

Malaysia is an increasingly prosperous, successful and educated democracy. It is, generally, a unified society that respects diversity, and its diversity is a major contributor to its unity. But we must not be complacent. It is often noted that peace is more than the mere absence of war, and, as the Preamble to the UNESCO Constitution states, "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." Similarly, unity is more than the mere absence of manifestations of disunity; true and lasting unity, like true and lasting peace, has to be created in our minds.