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How Much to the Individual, and How Much to Society? Of Self-interest and Common Good

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Introduction

“Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.” (*The Social Contract* 52; bk. I, ch. 1) Over two centuries ago, Rousseau has already addressed the puzzles that we still have today—that we are born free to care about our own well-being, but at the same time, born within society with practically no choice of leaving. Torn between the tension of the conflicting self-interest and common interest of society, how should we assign the proportion that we dedicate our lives to each to discern an ideal social life? This essay serves to address this issue by consulting the works of Huang Zongxi, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Adam Smith.

Common View: Selfishness as Human Nature

As much as the three thinkers differ in their accounts of solutions to the issue, however, they all share the view that the tendency to put one's self-interest in high regard is a part of human nature. Huang states that “man is born to be of self-interest” since the formation of society, claiming

that it would be irrational for one to not pursue their self-interest (“On the Prince”). Rousseau describes the “nature of man” being that “its first law is to see his preservation; its first concerns are those he owes himself” (*The Social Contract* 53; bk. I, ch. 1). Smith also regards “the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another” originated from ones “regard to their own interest” and “self-love” (141–142). All of them regard selfishness as a characteristic that comes naturally from a human, for survival, self-preservation and promotion of well-being.

Fundamental Differences in Interpretation

1. Social Roles

A distinction between their works is their differences in the perceptions of social roles of citizens and the ruler. Huang claims that the ruler has a role to ensure citizens’ right to pursue self-interest and help society in promoting peace and stability through forfeiting his own self-interest (“On the Prince”). The prince is the one who defines the common interest of society (“On the Prince”). Rousseau holds similar views on the role of the government. However, as he emphasizes authority comes from citizens, the origin of power to the rulers’ role is different. Citizens are the one to interpret the details of common interest through unanimous agreement, then through the transferal of power, the government is entitled to operate according to the common interest to secure citizens’ self-interest.

Smith conversely believes the government plays no role. The free market economy alone defines and helps achieve the common interest of the society. Citizens’ responsibility is to act according to their self-interests.

2. Relationship between Self-interest and Collective Interest

Another fundamental difference is the way the three thinkers relate self-interest to collective interest. Huang sees the self-interest of the ruler itself being in conflict with and as the biggest threat to citizens' self-interest. Therefore, he believes the forfeiture of the ruler's self-interest will lead to both the protection of individual's self-interest and achievement of common good ("On the Prince"). Rousseau claims that the forfeiture of all citizens' self-interest for the common interest of society will eventually lead to common good. Within the common good achieved, the self-interests intended by individuals are also achieved. In the ideal society, there will no longer be any conflicts or tensions between self-interest and common interest. Smith believes that self-interest acts as a means to the end of common good of society.

Following the brief accounts of the similarities and differences in their views, there will be a further elaboration of their respective views.

Huang Zongxi's Account

Huang holds the welfare and justifiable self-interests of people in high regard. The ruler is a servant rather than a master to his people, and that the emperor should will for the people but not for himself. The arbitrator's selflessness allows society to "gain from his interests," and "prevent from his sufferings" ("On the Prince"). His officials should be obligated to the benefits of the people, as well as the ruler if the ruler wills for the people ("On Ministership"). As suppressing the will for his own interest is an act contrary to human nature, it is a tough task which many avoid by either quitting or becoming a tyranny according to Huang ("On the Prince").

Huang is aware that merely offering the power to the emperor and the ministers will generate a system that relies too much on the ruler's ability of ethical and logical judgement. He therefore proposes the establishment of distinct "schools" that serve as mini-parliaments for free discussion and debate of political issues ("Schools"). They can be assessed by the public, allowing citizens to learn about the notion of right and wrong from a second institution independent of the government. It also serves as an advisory board, directly giving advices to the emperor in social welfare issues ("Schools"). Social pressure and the advisory purpose helps prevent absolute power which leads to emperor's own self-interest overriding the common interest of society.

Rousseau and the General Will

Rousseau spotted the tension between the ruled and the ruler, as mentioned in the beginning. To solve this problem, he proposed treating the people as "sovereign" (*The Social Contract* 52; bk. I, ch. 1) with authority over themselves and have them gathered in assemblies to make laws by voting, allowing the people to be practically ruling over themselves. However, he also noticed that "will of all" (i.e. self-interest) conflicts with the "general will". He then suggests that citizens must be educated into citizenship with civic virtues, so that they will "will nothing contrary to the will of the society" (*Discourse on Political Economy* 149) and will not be blinded by particular interests. Citizens also have to vote for what is believed to be the general will. The government will administer the laws that have reflected the general will of citizens, leading to a commonwealth, which both promotes self-interest and common good of society. It also prevents the legislator from imposing his own self-interest and hindering

collective interest by a separation of legislative power, which citizens hold; and the execution power, which the ruler holds.

Smith and the “Invisible Hand”

Smith believes self-interest can enhance the collective welfare through the “invisible hands” of the market. He believes that human has a propensity of exchanging goods which originates from the human nature of self-love (141–142). And he believes human acts rationally, and thus generally acts in one’s own self-interest and thus will exchange goods for one’s self-interest and desire for wealth. The market benefits society as a whole by firstly transforming citizens into specialization, in which citizens develop their own talent, improving the overall quality of products. The division of labour in specialization also improves productivity, leading to an increase in the number of goods available and increases the profit of the seller and thus of the workers’. In this way, the self-interest driven motivation, initially unintended for collective interest eventually promotes “general opulence” (141).

Discussion

It is important to note that the three works are all written to address to the major social and political problems occurring at that time. They may be a breakthrough or a successful attempt in solving those problems in the past but may not practically apply to modern society.

Huang’s proposal has attempted to limit the absolute power of the ruler. The idea of “school” is a prototype of democracy—which enhances freedom of speech and critical thinking and also increases the transparency

of government's operation. The emperor can understand his people's needs more comprehensively by listening to some of their opinions directly, making the acquisition of opinions more effective due to the reduced negative effects caused by bureaucracy, like conspiracies of eunuchs and ministers that avoid certain messages to reach the emperor. However, the enforcement of "school" as a platform for advice alone is ineffective in constraining the ruler's action. There is no coercion or sanctions to limit the ruler. It remains to be a state of absolute monarchy, in hopes of being able to wait for a wise and benevolent emperor to appear, which is rare as shown by the huge proportion of tyranny in the history of Empirical period of China like Xia Jie and Zhou You Wang (Yong). Also, as the ruler only consulted the opinions of scholars and students in the "school", their opinions may not reflect the majority of citizens. Being in an ivory tower, their opinions may also be too idealized and detached from the reality.

Rousseau's idea attempts to solve the problem of excessive power of the ruler that can be imposed upon citizens, a problem unsolved by Huang. He therefore introduces the idea of men as "sovereignty" (*The Social Contract* 52; bk. I, ch. 1) and a democratic procedure of voting. He suggests that power comes from the people, hence people have control over their lives and destiny. However, his proposal is unpractical due to the ample unrealistic assumptions of either the non-existence or existence of many political parties, as well as the absence of large inequalities. Also, it has generated numerous problems including the tyranny of the majority, in which the minority is completely silenced by censorship encouraged by Rousseau. It also sacrificed intrinsic values such as pluralism, diversity and freedom for equality to be achieved. Although equality is important for a society, it cannot lead to a good life without other intrinsic values

accompanying. Imagine that in prisons, where all prisoners are being treated equally, but freedom and diversity is prohibited, a good life is still beyond reach. The severity in the limitation of freedom of Rousseau's idea may lead to totalitarianism. It is suspicious that Rousseau is suggesting a totalitarian state by saying that citizens can be "forced to be free" (56; bk. I, ch. 8), and that a legislator with no legitimate grounds can educate citizens to citizenship which is contrary to Rousseau's claim that no one has natural authority over another (56; bk. I, ch. 8).

Smith's account in contrast has successfully eliminated the government's power over citizens, as the government has no role in assisting society to achieve common interest. However, Smith's idea is too idealistic and undermining of the fact that money can easily be transformed into power in which the rich can dominate the lives of the poor. The increase in productivity of the workers does not necessarily equate the increase in their wages. Also, division of labour may lead to alienation of workers (Marx 171). Smith himself is also aware that excessive self-love of entrepreneurs may lead to exploitation of workers' interests in cases like monopoly and collusion (158), but he did not address any possible solutions to it. His optimism in justifying his system in saying masters cannot reduce wages to a level below the subsistence for survival (160–161) also shows his lack of empathy to the labourers, believing it is alright to sacrifice workers' rights for universal opulence.

Conclusion

Does common good really exist? Humans are unique and diversified, with different backgrounds, values and interests. It is impossible for them

to have the same perception of common good, even if they could agree on what is best for society, people would still disagree on the means, the details in how it could be achieved. Rousseau's idea of having citizens to reach a unanimous agreement is absurd. The totalitarian alike state that he proposed is only repressing the existing differences and conflicts by forcing everyone into agreeing to a single perception of common good. Also, Rousseau's idea encourages the domination of power of the ruler, just like Huang's proposal.

I do not hold the same optimism as Smith has for the "invisible hands" of the market. A free market economy with completely no borders will lead to the tyranny of entrepreneurs. It seems that Smith's proposal is not any better than Huang and Rousseau in this respect, as power is dominated by entrepreneurs instead. Despite that, Smith's argument stands out from the other two proposals due to its respect for freedom and individuality demonstrated by its lack of governmental intervention and free economy. It has prevented an absolute monarchy or totalitarianism, which seriously limits the freedom of the individual. However prosperous or peaceful society that Huang's or Rousseau's system can make of, which I highly doubt, a life with severe limitation of freedom and individuality is not worth living.

Although the lack of government intervention is a major flaw that can lead to the exploitation of workers, the idea that society is free from political constraints allows distinctive ideas to blossom. Diversity splits the community into different groups of interest. As people who may agree on one issue may not agree on another, diversity of a community allows it to exert a pressure that forces all individual interests to be taken account of with the help of a fair political body. With the benefit of freedom and

pluralism, selfishness of individuals might bring people closer to the goal of achieving common good through the balancing of power. In Smith's case, a limited government intervention should be imposed in response to the demands of exploited workers, to act as a balance of power against the entrepreneurs, to protect workers' rights, as well as to prevent monopoly and collusion.

Therefore, concluding from the arguments above, democracy would be the ultimate solution to leading a good life for society as a whole. Democracy would be an effective way to consider the self-interests of every individual, in which through open discussions and voting, aims to help society move closer to achieving the common good for all.

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Teacher’s comment:

Tiffany’s essay focuses on the human nature, self-interest, which creates individual behavior in both the social, political and economic contexts, resulting in a consequent reinterpretation of the common good to our society. This essay not only shows clear expression of ideas and the knowledge, which is well integrated and supported by evidence from our selected texts, her own point of view is also provided in the conclusion of the essay. Tiffany’s essay is well-written. (Lui Wing Sing)