

Life? Liberty? Love?

Reflections on the Coronavirus Pandemic

By He Guanghu

Foreword

“Life is really valuable, Love is more!

But the two can be sacrificed, for sake of Liberty!”

Nearly all the Chinese people of my generation and of the last and next generations could recite this poem quite well. It is not because that they were familiar with the author Petofi Sandor (1823-1849), the Hungarian poet who gave his young life in the battle for liberty of his nation, but because that “Petofi Club”, the small group of young intellectuals in Budapest during the 1956 Storm, became very notorious for being attacked, by all Chinese propaganda organs, as an anti-communist conspiratorial “reactionary organization”, in nearly 20 years. Then, this poem in its Chinese translation by famous poet Yinfu (1910-1931) in the most popular form (“wuyan jueju” that consists in only 20 Chinese characters) was found out, and soon became the absolutely most widespread foreign poem, owing to its easiness as well as its inspiration.

This poem puts simply forward an idea of values, and a clear judgment of the values of three great elements of human life: Liberty is the highest, Love is the lower, Life the lowest and can be satisfied, though valuable.

In the age and context of Petofi, this judgment could get support of many of his country fellows; in my country fellows of those generations, there were also many who would agree with him silently at that time.

Now, in the tragic situation of the coronavirus pandemic throughout the world, this question about how elements of human life relate to each other and which one is higher began surprisingly appearing, especially clearly in the mass demonstrations happened in Germany and America, and in the governmental policies and public reaction in different countries. It is highly worth reflecting on that in the global crisis, the values of the three human elements seem to be so contradicted to one another that they cannot be taken at same time!

Now that the small virus has been bringing out scores of millions suffered

and over one million died in such an age of highly developed medical science and technology and social control measures, and we have not yet seen the end of tunnel nearly one year later, is it not necessary to make some serious reflections from different and multi-dimensional perspectives?

1. Sacrifice Life for Liberty?

1.0. Defining Life, Liberty and Love

Eros (*xiai*, length of Love), Philia (*qingai*, width of Love), Agape (*renai*, *daai*, *aixin*, height of Love)—*Loving heart*

1.1. For sake of protection of life, more and more people conform to the administrative requirements or rules for social-distancing, mask-wearing, etc. But for sake of reservation of liberty, many demonstrators protest such rules, and their attitude can be expressed in a poem after Petofi style:

“Life is truly valuable, Liberty is more! But Life can be satisfied, for sake of Liberty!”

1.2. The problem here is that in the pandemic, how you live relates to how others live. If you are infected and then infect others, you would impair their right to decide their life. When you neglect your own life, you are neglecting lives of other people.

But, morally speaking, anybody has no right to make sufferings while he/she has the right to pursue happiness; legally speaking, anybody has no right to deprive others' of lawful liberty while he/she has the liberty to exert his/her own lawful right; theologically speaking, anybody has no right to neglect others' lives, even no right to neglect his/her own life!

1.3. Therefore, the “Reverence for Life” (A. Schweitzer) should be held up as a basic principle in the pandemic and “Post-Corona” age. That means the reverence of life of yours as well as other people's, human as well as other animals', because all the lives have the same ultimate and holy origin, all lives are interdependent on each other and connected as members of a whole body.

So, we reject the attitude of many demonstrators above-mentioned for this reason: you may sacrifice your own life for your own liberty or for the whole's liberty, but you cannot sacrifice the life of others or of the whole for your own

liberty!

2. Sacrifice Liberty for Life?

2.0. Then, how about an argument from the opposite side? How would it be to sacrifice one's liberty for the sake of life?

Y.N. Harari published an essay titled as "The World after Coronavirus "soon after the pandemic broke out, pointing to a huge danger that the administrative restrictions on liberty with various high-tech means due to the pandemic may be prolonged or become perpetual. Many facts show that the danger is truly real. So, we also must positively consider the demand put forward by the demonstrators mentioned above.

2.1. After the Chinese government locked down the city of Wuhan, some villagers blocked roads with stones and clubs, stopping with all means any vehicles from Wuhan and Hubei entering or passing their regions; many districts forbade people from outside to enter. Even long after, there were some compounds were isolated by peasants around, some citizens rejected compatriots returning from abroad in spite whether they passed the official health check and even quarantine. And recently there were reports about old people unable to remember "health code" were denied to bus aboard. All these are just the top of a huge iceberg.

2.2. These phenomena lead to a serious question: You may sacrifice your own liberty for your life or for the life of the whole, but do you have the right to sacrifice the lawful liberty of other people or of the whole for the sake of your own life?

The answer is obviously the negative. In the case of sacrificing the lawful liberty of others is not for sake of the life of yours or of the whole, but for sake of some interests else, the answer is more obviously and absolutely the negative.

The commonality of such cases (or banality of evil, in Arendt word) cannot make them reasonable or justify them.

2.3. As for human nature, the relationship of liberty (or freedom) and life is neither juxtaposition nor contradiction. The former is the essential element of the latter.

Therefore, if a person lost freedom (not only in socio-political but also in philosophical, ethical and psychological senses) in part or totally, he/she may still live as a living creature, but he/she actually lost his/her human life in part or totally.

This is the reason for such terms as “vegetative people” and for abolishing the slavery system.

And if we consider the sociality as essential to the human nature, associating with the feelings of people watching their familiar noisy streets turned empty, and the sadness for keeping away from their lovers or beloved, we can understand more the attitude and mentality of those demonstrators--Is such a life a human life? Is such a life worth living?

However, if you, for the truly human life, even lost your biological life, would that be like “taking water with a bamboo basket”?

Here it seems that we have fallen into a dilemma: “Life or Liberty, this is the question!”

3. Aixin or Charity—the Final Answer?

3.0. Once I saw two slogans on my wife's sport jacket: “Enough is a Feast”, “Man has only himself as his only friend and his only enemy.” Then I thought: If a man has only himself as his friend, is it not because he only loves himself? And if a man becomes his own enemy, is it not because he indulges in his excessive pleasure or willful liberty?

3.1. In the pandemic, we may feel that the “warnings” or “notices” about healthy habits and everyday trifles are too troublous, and keeping away from others is too boring, so that we cannot but cry out or say in heart: “I am tired of this, no better than to die! I will go out! ”

However, when we think of our wives or children, parents or lovers, friends or beloved... may be infected owing to our taking liberty at will to do what we want to do, then we could come back to our senses, and could control ourselves. Because of the Aixin (Loving heart) or Charity, we can love others, and could feel that what we have now is enough, even is a feast.

On the other hand, we may think that if our death could be returned with normal and free and happy living for all our beloved people, then we would not be so afraid of death.

Seen from this perspective, when you have Aixin or Charity, you will be able to love the life of others and to limit your liberty voluntarily, and you will not sacrifice the life of other for your own liberty, and will also not satisfy the

liberty of others for your own life, not mention for some other advantages or interests.

3.2. In fact, not only the life, but also the liberty is a whole. When you see somebody being deprived of lawful liberty and make no reaction to that, your own liberty is already in danger.

Therefore, to deprive somebody of his/her lawful liberty means actually to deprive the whole community of their liberty, or to deprive each person of his/her liberty. Correspondingly, to respect and cherish the liberty of others—of course including the freedom to choose life and to pursue happiness—means in fact to respect and cherish the freedom of the whole community. This respect and cherishing can only come from a loving heart, from Charity.

3.3. So, “Life or Liberty?” this seeming dilemma in fact has a solution, and that is the final solution for countless problems in human life, that is the Aixin or Renai, namely “Charity” or “all-embracing love”, which we mentioned in section 1.0.

That means not to “only love yourself” and not to “indulge in your own liberty”, but to “love others as yourself” and to “overcome yourself”. The loving charity will make life perfect, and make liberty perfect!

This can be expressed also in a poem after Petofi style: “For Life or for Liberty? The decision is so confusing! Having great Love in heart, you can make the both shining!”

Epilogue

Since the coronavirus pandemic broke out, the whole human family has thirstily been waiting and hoping for some effective medicine or vaccine. While ten months have passed, we still have to be waiting and hoping!

However, love or charity is something that has ever been there deeply in our heart, and we can put into practice immediately!

The Ren (charity) in Confucius' teaching derives from the Heaven's will, according to Dong Zhongshu, a great Confucian scholar (1st century BC). And the Love (agape) in Jesus' teaching is God himself, according to St. John, a beloved disciple of Jesus himself. So, Love or Charity has its origin in the

transcendent and the holy.

To hold up Love or Charity, in terms of Paul Tillich, the German-American theologian, means to unite the Heteronomy (actions by administration's rules or others' control) and the Autonomy (actions by freewill or self-consciousness), and to heighten or deepen them to the Theonomy. Theonomy is not imposed from external authority, because it is the law above oneself as well as the law within oneself, and it is some autonomy which transcends the self and realizes one's own sacred root.

If the coronavirus pandemic could enforce the humankind to raise their action decision to a level of theonomy uniting autonomy and heteronomy, then, their human life and liberty could possibly reach such a horizon where they can do anything at will without violating the universal law!

Of course, besides these, we need and will have more reflections. Many aspects of this calamity, such as those Harari's essay and other thinkers pointed out, deserve our deep reflection and serious discussion.

Facing to the disastrous pandemic, human beings must make great efforts to save themselves, but at the same time, they also must pray for the mercy and help from God!

11th October, 2020, Summerbridge, PA.