Absolute Freedom Means No Freedom at All: A Reflection on the Value of Individual Freedom Supremacy

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Keywords: Freedom; Value; Yin-Yang; Five elements.

Abstract. The absolute priority of individual liberty and freedom has become a taboo and political correctness for long in modern western ideology. However, many evidences indicates that over emphasizing the value of individual freedom in practice not only will not turn out good results, but also leads to the opposite direction, i.e., losing of freedom. From a cross-cultural perspective, over emphasizing the value of individual freedom is only an Anglo-American cultural particularity. Freedom is only one among other important human values. According to ancient Chinese philosophy of Yin-Yang and Five elements, these different values are mutually correlated. Over emphasizing the absoluteness of one value will cause the interaction of other elements, and will lead things towards opposite direction. Therefore, it is necessary to say no to the cult of extreme liberalism.

Introduction

In spite of the continuously increased frequency of gun violence and the new record number of gun victims, the mainstream public opinion in the USA is still reluctant to implement more strict law to deprive the right of private gun ownership, because that will shake one of the cornerstones of American politics and touch the taboo of American culture, i.e., the absolute priority of individual right and freedom. For centuries, the liberalist ideology and the idea of individual freedom supremacy has deeply influenced the politics and institutional arrangement of the so called western free world. It has also been considered as the top universal values and has been unilaterally promoted by the leading western powers to other countries. However, in practice, the good idea seems has not turned out good results, sometimes it even goes over to the opposite side. Imaging, in a country where the freedom of individual gun ownership is protected, men and women have to be equipped with guns and bulletproof vests when going to the concerts, night clubs, schools, supermarkets, and even garlic festivals, etc., these people have actually lost their freedom of living in safety.

In this paper I will discuss the negative aspects of over emphasizing the value of individual freedom under the influence of the prevailing of the extreme western liberalism. I will also argue that, from a cross cultural view, the individual freedom supremacy is only an Anglo-American cultural particularity rather than a universal value. From the perspective of some non-western cultural tradition, it is not necessary to emphasize the value of individual liberty and freedom to that exaggerated degree, the general and collective welfare, harmony and security of the whole society are also very important values. Furthermore, I will provide some analysis according to the ancient Chinese philosophy of Yin-Yang and Five Elements to show that the relationship between individual freedom and collective solidarity is dialectically related, and mutually supplementary. There is mutual interactive relationship among different human values and they are mutually promoting as well as mutually containing with each other. In social practice, excessive emphasizing of only one value, for instance, the value of individual freedom, will definitely lead to its opposite direction, that is, no freedom at all. Therefore, it is necessary to break through the thinking pattern of dualistic opposition and take a dialectic, dynamic and balanced view of different social cultural values.
The Negative Consequence of Individual Freedom Supremacy

The idea of individual freedom supremacy is the core spirit of the Western liberalism. Despite its complicated historical background, and the many controversial and even conflicting theories and explanations of its connotations, the idea of individual freedom or liberty has been widely accepted as an axiom. Sometimes the priority of this value has been exaggerated to an extreme degree, it has become not only the constitutive ideology of modern Western culture, but also almost a sacred and untouchable political taboo. In general, liberalism is the dominant modern Western ideology, as Alasdair MacIntyre once remarked: contemporary political debates in the Western world “are almost exclusively between conservative liberals, liberal liberals, and radical liberals” [1]. Not only that, along with the process of globalization, the idea of western liberalism has also been spread to all over the world, and has various kinds of varietals.

Liberalism generally considers individuals’ freedom, right and property as the top value in morality, social economy and politics. It has made remarkable contribution in promoting human right, social equality, free trade economy and political democracy, etc., during the process of social development and modernization in many countries. However, excessively and one-sided emphasizing the value of individual freedom alone and put it at the unlimited high position has also some negative consequences in certain situations, especially when it has been applied nominally regardless of the concrete connotations and social contexts in reality.

The connotations of the concept of “freedom” or “liberty” in its historical and cultural contexts are rich and complicated, with many different and sometimes contradictory interpretations. However, in modern times, this concept has been more and more narrowed and limited to the social-political and economic realms. Pursuing “liberty” and “freedom” only means struggling and contending for the material “interests” or political “rights” that are supposed to innately belong to every individual. When the idea of “liberty” has been imported to non-Western countries with quite different historical backgrounds and cultural contexts, its meaning has become even more narrow and simplified. “Liberty” and “freedom” means going to the squares and participating in demonstrations, rallying on the street and protesting against the government, or even taking up weapons to fight the police or people with different views. The good idea seems has not always turned out good results in reality, sometimes it even goes over to the opposite side. Many “revolutions” under the name of liberation and freedom, have not really brought the positive results to the people live in those relevant countries or areas, the social environment even has become worse after they have gotten the so called “freedom.” The fighting, or revolution for the sake of freedom and democracy encouraged and sometimes aided by certain Western countries has often led to disorder and chaos, triggered riots and conflicts, caused division and confrontation among people in these societies, and the social and economic conditions have remarkably deteriorated. Many cases in the past decade or two happened in some countries and areas have repeatedly shown that the so-called color revolutions in the name of freedom and democracy will not produce any good results.

Even in the developed modern Western countries, excessive emphasizing on the absolute value of freedom and liberty may also lead to the opposite direction. For instance, in spite of the continuously increased frequency of gun violence and the new record number of gun victims, the mainstream society and the leading politicians in the USA are still reluctant to implement more strict law to deprive the right of private gun ownership. One of the reasons behind this is because that will shake one of the cornerstones of American politics and touch the taboo of American culture, i.e., the absolute priority of individual liberty and freedom. However, under the threat of the increasing frequency of unpredictable gun violence, if men and women have to carry guns or bulletproof vests to supermarkets, schools and other places, they are actually deprived of the freedom to live safely. Aroused by the spirit of individual “liberty,” as well as by the excessively sanctified concept of “democracy,” no one wants to suffer losses; no one is willing to make any compromise when one’s own “interests” or “rights” are involved. Human relationships in society are strained, frictions and conflicts are intensified, and people’s lives are no longer peaceful and secure. In general, over emphasis on the priority of individual freedom has become a disease of modern society in many areas of today’s world.
Therefore, some historical examination and philosophical reflection on the liberalist freedom value supremacy is necessary. It will be beneficial to rectify the future direction of development for human society.

The Supreme Value of Freedom is Just an Anglo-American Cultural Particularity

From a cross-cultural perspective, the liberalist idea and value of individual freedom supremacy is not unquestionable. Actually, emphasizing the absolute priority of the value of “freedom” and “liberty” is only a cultural particularity in the modern Anglo-American tradition, rather than a universal law. It can be tracked to 17th century England, where there were political and economic contests among the king, feudal barons, Calvinist Puritans, medieval jurists, and others concerning issues related to taxation, religion, and land, etc. It is only since the later 18th century that the terms such as “liberal ideas,” “liberal views,” “liberal principles,” and “liberal systems” began repeatedly appearing in the works of Adam Smith and other contemporary thinkers [2]. To the mid-19th century, the idea and value of “freedom,” “liberty” along with its presumed premises including “natural law,” “individual rights,” and “contractualism,” has gradually been accepted as self-evidently axiomatic. This fundamentalist liberal value served the special purposes of certain class in that society at that time, and has been deemed as the cause of the booming of the Great British Empire. It has also played an important role in America’s independence, thus has been fully inherited as the most important cultural tradition of the United State.

Investigated from the academic history and theoretical level, liberalism has a deep root in the Anglo-American religious and philosophical culture, with abundant theoretical support from such important philosophers as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Hill Green, L.T. Hobhouse, Friedrich Hayek, and John Rawls. Despite the fact that their views on what “freedom” or “liberty” is and what “liberalism” means are quite different, as a dominant modern Western ideology, freedom and liberalism has gradually evolved to a simplest political taboo and an icon of ideological cult. Any challenge to the so called “liberal democracy” would be considered eccentric and outrageous.

I am not at all denying that “freedom” or “liberty” is an important human value, but I think putting that value on the absolute priority position over anything else, is just a modern Anglo-American cultural particularity. Not all cultures in the world have such a value priority. For instance, the African philosophy emphasizes more on the value of “Ubuntu,” which puts the value of group solidarity and community above the value of individual freedom [3]. In ancient China, individual freedom, albeit a value worthy of pursuit, has never been put on the top position of value priority. It is not among the “five happiness” or the five most valuable things in human life, namely, longevity, rich, healthy, being moral and have a peaceful death [4]. In fact, in any society, besides the value of individual freedom, there are always many other equally important human values, for instance, peace, security, social order, rule of law, harmony, equality, solidarity, social order and stability are all important values. From the perspective of traditional Chinese culture, there seems to be no reason to place only the value of individual freedom above all the other values. There may be some contradictions and conflicts among these different values, but that is just the normal situation of an organic and dynamic society. From the perspective of Chinese philosophical and cultural tradition, it is not necessary to emphasize the value of individual liberty and freedom to that exaggerated degree; sometimes, the general and collective welfare, harmony, security and peace of the whole society are more important. Keeping a dynamic, dialectic and re-adjustable balance among different values will maintain the general healthiness of a society.

A Yin-Yang and Five Elements’ Perspective of Freedom and Other Values

Here, I would like to introduce a traditional Chinese perspective on the analysis of the dialectic and multi-dimensional relationship among the different elements in social political life, based on the ancient Chinese concept of “Yin-yang” and “five elements.”
From the western polarized and dualist view, the different values are contrary and mutually exclusive. However, according to the traditional Chinese Yin-Yang philosophy, the relationship between those different values are not simply conflicting or contradicting, nor can be simply distinguished as good or bad, right or wrong. They are mutually reacting, mutually restraining with each other, thus to keep the balanced and healthy development of the whole society. From the Yin-Yang dialectic view, the relationship between individual right and freedom on one side, and the social solidarity and collective interests on the other side, is dialectically related and mutually supplementary. Sometime in a society or a state, a strong and authoritarian political solidarity will effectively protect the right and freedom of all its social members, and the increasing of individual rights, freedom in the society may also enhance the common political identification and social solidarity.

Ancient Chinese philosophers also developed the “wu xing” or the “five elements” theory to explain the complex and dialectic relationship among different natural and social factors of the world. This view considers the things in the world are all composed of five elements, namely metal, wood, water, fire and earth. However, the five elements obviously should not be understood in the sense of natural science as five real material elements in physical world, rather it should be understood as a philosophical view of different elements or factors in variety of natural, social and even psychological domains. The essence of the five elements theory is a systematic and dynamic view of different elements or factors in a system. It is a philosophical theory reflecting the objective rule of the development of complicated systems. It reveals that all systems are composed of different parts or factors represented by variety of elements. These elements are always interacting with each other, and mutually conditioning with each other. This complicated relationship is symbolized by the circulation of “xiang sheng” (mutually generating or reinforcing) and “xiang ke” (mutually restraining or overcoming).

Philosophically, this theory provides a dialectic, dynamic and correlative view of different things in the world. If we can understand the true essence of the “five elements” theory and adopt it in an innovative way, it can also be applied in explaining the general dynamics in social political phenomenon in modern society. Some Chinese scholars have tried to use the “five elements” to represents the five major factor in social development, namely, freedom(wood), competition(fire), hegemony(earth), revolution(metal) and equality(water), which function together to determine the social development and political momentum in a society [5]. The development of society is pushed forward by the joint forces of these five factors. Of course, the value, power and energy of each factor in any given time are usually not equal and balanced, sometimes one factor may be more dominant or important than other factor, and then in other times another factor may replace the position of the previously dominant one. But in general they are functioning together to promote the development of the society. None of the five can claim to have the permanent and ultimate dominance over all the others.

Furthermore, combining with Lao Zi’s theory of “reversion is the action of Dao,” over emphasizing or enhancing of one single elements in the system will always lead to the extreme, and then it will go towards the opposite direction of the same factor. For instance, freedom (wood) has the character of growing and stretching, however, the extreme and crazy growing of wood, if without the balance and control of equality (water), will surely destined to competition (fire), sometimes the “fire” will become uncontrollable violence and riot, just like the uncontrollable mountain fire in the dry California mountain areas. Then it will burn everything into scorched earth, that is, hegemony (earth), which is obviously the opposite of freedom. Of course, when hegemony goes extreme, it will also cause revolution (metal), and then start a new cycle. In this organic and cyclic interaction of the “five elements” system, an action started from any of the five factors will finally give a reaction to itself. And during the process of this cycle, the action from this factor will also interact with other factors in different ways. Sometimes promote each other, sometimes restrict each other. As a result, during a certain stage, excessive strengthening of a particular element, may directly or indirectly lead to adverse consequences for this element. According to this theory, the absolute idea of individual
freedom and the excessive emphasize of individual rights in practice will be doomed to its opposite, i.e., no freedom at all.

Summary

There is an old saying in China: “things always reverse themselves after reaching an extreme.” This rule is also presented by Lao Zi as “Reversing is the movement of Dao.” The western dualistic opposing way of thinking always tends to divide human society into the simple opposition between good and bad, right and wrong, freedom and autocracy, democracy and centralization. But in reality, things are never that simple and clear. In fact, those seemingly opposing factors are mutually relying and reversing under certain conditions. For instance, in the capitalist free market economy, freedom trade without any government interference is an excessively strengthened value, which has certainly promoted the competition and economic development. But gradually the competition has resulted in the hegemony by the few technical elites and financial barons, and the gap between them and the majority people become wider and wider, thus dramatically destroyed the social equality, while equality is just the precondition of freedom. The “losers” in the battle of free market eventually have also lost their freedom. As a result, a revolution from the “losers” may be lunched to overthrow the hegemony of the minority elites. Actually the current populist movement in certain western countries can also be viewed as a kind of “revolution”. It represents the willing of a great majority of the mass (the losers in the new technological competition) who want to change the hegemony of the few technical elites and financial barons. Some iconic figures or charismatic leaders of the populist “revolution” may directly call for restriction on certain freedom, such as to reduce free trade, to restrict the free speech of media, to block the free immigration, etc.

The “Yin-Yang” dialectic relation and the “five elements” schema also suggests that, during certain stage in the cycle, readjusting or rebalancing the rate of the elements, finding out and maintaining a “zhong” (balanced and appropriate) degree between opposing factors, such as the individual liberalism and the collective or centralized authoritarianism, etc., may prevent the whole system going towards a risk. For instance, redistributing resources more equally may slow down vicious competition; providing more fair competition opportunity may reduce the risk of revolution; increasing the degree of individual freedom can reduce the impact of hegemony; enhance hegemony may break the mediocrity and dullness of egalitarianism; calling for revolution may overcome disengaged freedom, etc. In general the “five elements” theory provides a dynamic and systematic view on the complicated and dialectic relationship among different factors in social political system. This may provide a clue for solving some social problems and contradictions in some societies in today’s world.

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