

How about the Choking of Human Flourishing, and “Over-flourishing”?

An Opening Remark on the “International Seminar on Human Flourishing in East Asia”

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Last summer, when my wife and I first looked at the various plants in the backyard after moving into our present house, we did not pay any attention to that small and ugly tree, because there were several big trees there. However, once my wife found that the small and poor tree had a few branches wreathed with many vines, she cut off those vines.

A few days after, to my great surprise, we found that the small tree had become much taller and bigger, dancing with beautiful branches and light green leaves in breeze, like the “White Swan” in the Ballet “Swan Lake” – now it is really flourishing!

It reminded me of Cinderella and the Ugly Duckling: No matter how or whether the tree, the Duckling and Cinderella felt in the past, the past choking and the later flourishing were truly real, both from subjective and objective perspectives.

Therefore, it was an important advance for the research on human flourishing to go beyond psychology and pay attention to the realization of human potentials (Ryff & Keyes, Van der Weele). However, it would be much better if the negative side of the things, namely the choking of human flourishing, had received more attention.

And it reminded me of the teenage years of us three brothers – I myself, from the age of 13, as a schoolboy being fascinated with mathematics, used to spend hours each day, standing in crowded queues for the food ration, sometimes just for a bucket of water; and I had to leave school at 16 when the “Cultural Revolution” broke out. My eldest brother, at 16, when he was in love with astronomy, was denied entry to high school (with excellent records!), and had to spend 7 days a week breaking big rocks into small roadstones with a heavy hammer and a hand hammer, in order to help our widowed mother with his payment (RMB 20, nearly US\$ 3 a month!) during the years of the great famine. My second brother, also at 16, had to go to the countryside to labor and toil for his own livelihood,

The “International Seminar on Human Flourishing in East Asia” took place from July 10–11, 2023, at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA., organized by “The Human Flourishing Program at Harvard’s Institute for Quantitative Social Science.” Professor He Guanghu 何光沪 (born 1950) is an outstanding representative of research on Christianity in China. He first worked at the Institute for World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and from 2001 at Renmin University of China.

when he had graduated from middle school with excellent talents in literature, writing and painting.

Now, I can just say that I am a lifelong layman in mathematics. After two heart strokes, my eldest brother resumed his old hobby and got a telescope, much better than the one he made himself in his teenage years, at 78! But my second brother has died, as a retired businessman, in his room full of books, including three books written, printed and bound by himself! And I must say, the three of us have never been inconstant lovers!

I did not mention my sisters. And I did not mention the millions of people of my generation, of older and younger generations in China who have no possibility to realize their potential throughout their lives. But I must say, all the Chinese participants in today's seminar would not have been able to attend, if there had been no reformation of Mao's system during Deng's reign, as nowadays we can see that 20% of the young population are unemployed, and even the works of Hans Anderson are taken away from the kindergarten.

So, when we look at the Pyramids in Egyptian deserts, and lament over countless flourishing human beings "sacrificed for the few over-flourishing mausoleums," the living sacrificed for the dying and the dead through so many centuries, we should reflect upon the social pyramid which was the real cause of the choking of human flourishing, in comparison with, e.g. Greece then, where one witnessed a great flourishing of countless individual human beings. When we see the prosperous society, economy and culture in South Korea, and are surprised at her harvest achievements such as, for example, the rich and original attractive, inspiring and instructive TV series dramas, with such a small population, we should reflect upon the transformation of her social, economic and political systems which broke through the past choking of human flourishing, in comparison with, e.g. North Korea now, where we witness countless persons sacrificed for one person's over-flourishing.

Therefore, we must explore more of the contexts or situations, conditions or institutions the human beings had, have and will have, and try to find out which choke and which help human flourishing, and how they function. In the course of that, we must go not only into the fields of public health care, welfare system reconstruction and so on, but also into the fields of sociology, economics, politics, ethics, axiology and of such universal values as freedom, equality and justice (cf. A. Alexandrova, M.T. Lee, M. Seligman, M. Nussbaum).

A few days ago, I was attracted by a Netflix original series "Designated Survivor." In fact, nearly all the breathtaking crises appearing in that drama exist in reality, and could choke human flourishing, even threaten human existence itself. Are they not like these, for example: the war taking place in Ukraine, the Covid-19 and the lockdown that happened in Shanghai, China and throughout the world during its pandemic?

The drama seemed to miss a very serious crisis (at least in the episodes I watched), that is the great threat created by AI, which may be more dangerous to humanity than the atom bomb (S. Hawking), even to the degree of destruction of humankind.

However, more and more experts, including some forerunners in the field of AI, are beginning to take action against the threat. Their warnings are reminding us of a possibility in human flourishing – that some certain directions of development, or some kinds of over-flourishing (e.g., those relating to environmental crises), can be undesirable or wrong, and even dangerous or undermining to humanity itself!

Therefore, we must at least reflect upon the issue in the perspective of human nature (including its demonic elements), or in terms of philosophy and theology (M.J. Paul *et al.*, J. Stuhr), especially we must keep in mind that human beings have their own limitations, so they can never suppose themselves to be like God!

July 10, 2023, Cambridge, Massachusetts