

# **In Dialogue with Noah**

**Xie Phil Fei**  
**Medicine, United College**

## **PROLOGUE   How I Met Your Great Great Great... Great Grandfather**

It was 21st December 2012. People said that today would be the end of the world, yet it seemed to me that today was just another ordinary morning—until I opened my eyes.

ME: Waaaaah, how did I end up here? For God's sake!

NOAH: Aye, exactly.

ME: ...Now that's the worst joke I've ever heard.

NOAH: Hurry! There's no time to explain! The world is now at your hand!

ME: What?! Then we must hurry! What can I do?

NOAH: (*clears throat*) I mean, uh, what's your favourite book?

ME: ...

Noah went on to explain that he wanted to bring along a few books that would enlighten the future population, yet he had only limited room on the ark for books. So he prayed to God for help, and wished that I could recommend books that would help to build a good society and improve life.

NOAH: ... and that's why I need recommendations from you, messenger of God.

ME: Why don't you just build a larger ship?

NOAH: (*pauses and smiles*) For God's sake!

## **CHAPTER I About Society**

ME: So you have requested books about *good* society and *good* life, but before I start I shall beg your pardon. The speech I will give might be a bit blasphemous, for in future men are no longer ruled by God. Because you mentioned society, let me ask you: What do you think is the purpose of a society?

NOAH: That's a vague question. I don't know.

ME: Well, let us put it this way. What do you think is a good society?

NOAH : A good society should be one where everyone is devoted to God, and is willing to help each other instead of practising treachery and betrayal.

ME: Why would people be willing to help the others, even when such acts would not bring them any obvious benefits?

NOAH: Because in the process they themselves gain fulfillment! Moreover, through their kind acts they get to make more friends, and this social network itself is a treasure.

ME: There we go. Since what is good must be something that fulfills its purpose the best, the purpose of a society must be helping each other, at the same time benefitting every individual involved. Now according to your ideology I've chosen the most appropriate books, and if you don't mind I shall begin introducing the first book, *The Social Contract* by Rousseau.

Similar to what we just did, Rousseau also questioned the purpose of forming societies, which he thought is to "provide for his [man's] own preservation" (384; bk. I, ch. II). He explained that the power of nature was so great, that humans could rarely survive by their strengths as individuals. To overcome the resistance, humans had "no other means of preserving themselves than the formation, by aggregation, of a sum of forces" (391; bk. I, ch. VI). Rousseau therefore concluded that a society should exist for the population instead of any kind of kings or governments. As you see, Noah, his ideal is almost identical to the one you have, and this is why I chose his book. Moreover, Rousseau has made a lengthy and stringent argument about the legitimacy of a society. Now, to go back to the right of the population we described above, Rousseau called it "liberty," which I will briefly explain.

"Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains" (384; bk. I, ch. I). In this sentence, Rousseau explained the difference between natural and civil liberties. Natural liberty is the inborn freedom of doing whatever a man likes,

just like an animal. On the other hand, civil liberty is the limited freedom after man chains himself, in order to benefit from a society. These chains are exactly the laws that man must obey in the society, and in return this man receives rights granted by it. A simple example from the book would be the difference between “possession” and “property” (395; bk. I, ch. VIII). In a primitive state, possession of a man is bounded by his individual strength, and any man stronger than him can deprive him of his possession. However, in a civil state, men no longer “possess” any goods as every single member is required to alienate their possessions to the society, and these are the chains they put on. In return, the society would grant them “properties,” which are protected by legal rights, which other men cannot obtain through illegal ways.

NOAH: Why, this is actually very much like the teachings of God! Except the point about natural liberty, because all things on earth belong to God, including fish, birds and crops. We can only have the things when God allows us, but... People disobeyed, and that’s why the Flood.

ME: Yes, they are similar indeed. The distinction between natural and civil states can be seen in almost all civilisations, where people are bound to behave against their natural liberties. In fact, Rousseau himself agreed (though it is not his main point) that families, where children obey parents and parents protect children, were the first political societies (384; bk. I, ch. III). I see that you are familiar with the terminology now, and I shall talk a bit about equity.

Since in civil society everything is under the authorisation of laws, all men are equal. This is also a prerequisite for people to develop trust and achieve sustainable social harmony. If men were not equal, then it would be analogous to putting lambs and tigers in the same cage (*NOAH: What, can’t*

*I do that?*), and lambs would never trust the tigers. However, it is impossible to achieve absolute equity, because God created each man differently, and it is also unfair for hardworking people to be treated the same as lazy people. All we could do is to ensure that all men are equal before the law. We should also prevent extreme polarisations; as Rousseau said, “power shall never be great enough for violence,” “no citizens shall ever be wealthy enough to buy another,” and “none poor enough to be forced to sell himself.”(418–419; bk. II, ch. XI)

NOAH: That was inspiring. I’ve always thought that rules are just regulations in order to maintain order, and never thought that it could make people equal. How I wish to live in the future world!

ME: *Laws*, not rules. Laws make people equal, but not necessarily the same for rules. Besides, the future world might not be as ideal as you think it is... Some countries do not respect the rule of law; instead they practise rule by law, by which “law”—more like rules I’d say—is used as a tool by the government, and the government is superior to the “law.” Yet, even in countries that respect it, there exist polarisations.

NOAH: How can polarisations still exist? Isn’t everyone already equal? I don’t imagine that the hardworking people are that much more diligent or talented than the lazy ones, so much so that it causes polarisation.

ME: It is very, very complicated. In the future we practise division of labour and industrialisation. On one hand the quality of life in the future world is so much better, but on the other hand it comes at the cost of social inequality, since the division of labour creates social stratification, such as masters and

workmen. This explanation is overly simplified, and I would love to elaborate on this topic, but we shall move on because of the lack of time.

## CHAPTER II About the Quality of Life

ME: In the last part I have briefly introduced what it takes to build a legitimate society, but still haven't touched on what we need to achieve a good life. And because you've mentioned life, let me ask you...

NOAH: "...what do you think the purpose of a life is"? May I mind you that it isn't a good time to get philosophical? The flood is coming!

ME: Uh, ok. Do you want to hear about the spiritual or material aspect of the quality of life?

NOAH: To God Be the Glory! He shall take care of my spiritual life.

ME: Despite your being devoted to God, I would still strongly recommend you to hear about the spiritual aspect, as it not only consists of religion, but also social norms and cultures.

NOAH: (*shrugs*) If you insist... But I surely will not agree with other religions or gods.

ME: Very well, may I introduce to you *The Heart of Understanding* by Thích Nhất Hạnh?

In the last chapter, I have described what a legitimate society would be like. However, I skipped most of the part concerning how the laws are being

set up. In fact for laws aiming at common good being set up, people involved in lawmaking must think for the whole society instead for his own interests. Since all citizens are affected by the laws, everyone should be involved in the legislation process. However, it takes education and time for every citizen to seek the common good instead of personal interests, and sometimes it doesn't work even after millennia. To aid this situation, *The Heart of Understanding* would be a great material to start with.

The main focus of this book is the nature of life. Instead of regarding ourselves as independent and separate, Nhất Hạnh pointed out that we are “inter-beings.” For example, we rely on water, air, and crops to survive, and crops in turn relies on sunshine and farmers, and farmers learnt the art of farming through cultural heritage... These interrelationships would go on forever, until we find out that virtually everything in the world is interrelated. (Thích Nhất Hạnh 3–5) This is in fact very true; ecologically we are just a part of a very big system, and if any part of this system goes wrong, we would soon face the end of world (*ME: Not like this flood though, Noah; it is through some mechanisms that are much more mysterious*). With this concept in mind, we can come to the realisation that the well-being of the society is in fact the well-being of ourselves. In essence, common good and personal interests are the same thing, therefore people should be more willing to help each other, just like Nhất Hạnh has illustrated (52–53).

NOAH: Ah, interesting. It sounds absurd at first that I am related to plants that have no soul, but, on second thought, I couldn't have survived without eating crops. If I am so closely related to plants, then I must be even more closely related to people who have souls! This religion is trying to tell people how much they rely on and affect each other; instead of competitors, people

in the same community are indeed cooperators, and thus people will help each other in order to achieve individual well-being.

ME: That's very concise. However, even if people are competitors or even enemies, they are still closely related. Just like Nhất Hạnh said, there must be "evil" in order for there to be "good"; the same is true for high and low, poor and rich. Without the counterpart, how can you define these terms? This is explained by another important philosophy in this book, the "absence of impurity and chastity." (32)

People often discriminate against those who are poor, dirty and ill, and label them as "impure" or even "evil." However, Nhất Hạnh challenged this idea with the concept of inter-being. For example, let's say there is a king who enjoys eating meat everyday, which is a symbol of wealth. In order to provide him meat, lots of peasants will have to give up farming and raise cattle instead. Since the amount of food is reduced, some peasants will starve and cannot work as efficiently as before, and hence eventually lose their jobs and become beggars. Therefore, this noble king is responsible for the poor, dirty and ill beggars on the street.

There are many more interesting concepts in this book, but these two are the most useful ones in creating social harmony. While *The Social Contract* helps us to understand that everyone holds equal rights before the law, *The Heart of Understanding* illustrates how everyone shares the same responsibility. If this belief can be incorporated into the cultures and norms of all societies, then we may not even need rules and laws to keep order.

NOAH: This is astonishing! Though its core values do not completely comply with God's teaching, they neither contradict. If men can live not only for themselves, the whole world can benefit.

ME: I'm glad that I've inspired you.

NOAH: And I'm glad that God has sent you as messenger. Good luck on your way back!

## Works Cited

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract and Discourses*. 2007. Trans. G.D.H. Cole. Rpt. in *In Dialogue with Humanity: Textbook for General Education Foundation Programme*. Ed. Julie Chiu, Wai-ming Ho, Mei-yee Leung, and Yang Yeung. 2nd ed. Hong Kong: Office of University General Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2012. 383–421.

Thích Nhất Hạnh. *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajñāparamita Heart Sutra*. Ed. Peter Levitt. Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1988.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Teacher's comment:

The essay is an interesting crossover between the Platonic dialogue and futuristic fiction, in which “Me,” our narrator, travels through time to give counsel to Noah when the biblical figure prepares his ark for the big flood.

Phil pays tribute to Plato by setting the scene in a lively prologue, showing off his humor right from the start: “How I met your great great great... great Grandfather.” The Platonic overtone is all the more obvious when “Me,” acting with the hindsight of two millennia, guides Noah to new understanding by applying the Socratic Method. Like Plato, Phil cannot help

but allow the sagely “Me” to get into long raps that are the “meat” of the discussion. Yet he also takes care to break the one-sided teaching with Noah’s interruption and response, mixing banter with serious reflections.

Phil makes original connection between the two books recommended and draws ecological inferences from “inter-being,” which tie in well with the dialogue’s setting in a devastating flood. The dialogue is thoughtfully structured and the writer’s ability to integrate and reflect admirable. His conclusion that the two texts’ “core values” apply to “almost all things in the world,” however, requires further support and elaboration. (Julie Chiu)