

Mental Patients on an Island

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A proposal of forcing all patients with mental illness to live on an isolated island until complete recovery gains over 80% support from the public.¹ The general public has its own reason to approve the suggestion. If I were one of legislators, I would repeal this law based on three considerations. They are fairness, ethical concern and the soundness of the law.

Where there is smoke, there is fire. The general public want to isolate citizens with mental illness because they fear these patients would threaten their own safety. “Mental illnesses are heavily stigmatised” (Hong Kong College of Psychiatrists 6).² Recently, incidents in which patients with serious mental illness attacked people are reported, and many cases resulted in injury, and even death. The mass media establish a negative image of patients, too (Hong Kong College of Psychiatrists 7). A news article describes 40,000 patients as a “bomb” in the community (Xie, “40000 Serious Patients But Only 4000 Hospital Beds”). These negative impressions are deep-rooted in the public’s mind and strengthen the concern that they would become the next victim and therefore willing to see the approval of the proposal.

1 Hypothetical scenario given in the term paper question.

2 See Hong Kong College of Psychiatrists, especially pages 6–7, for the detailed stigma. Also refer to Ramsay et al. for the original content.

Regardless of the accuracy of the concern, it is unfair to separate patients from the majority. Rousseau states in *The Social Contract* that every citizen committed to the contract enjoys the same right as others (392; bk. I, ch. VI). Despite devotement to the state, patients do not have the same right as other people, namely, the freedom to move around in the city. In this case, the idea of “alienation” of all rights³ collapses since a member cannot get back the same right that he or she surrenders. The society goes back to one based on the “right of the strongest”. Rousseau explains, “[t]he strongest is never strong enough to be always the master, unless he transforms strength into right, and obedience into duty” (386; bk. I, ch. III). Once there is another force stronger than the original one, the “right” changes. In the present case, the “force” is the pressure of public opinion (over 80% of support), which is not legitimate. If the patients became the majority of the city, the situation would probably reverse. However, democracy should protect the minority from domination of the majority and address the common interest of every citizen. While laws are considered as acts of general will, the new law (confining mental patients to an island) does not concern general will but the will of all, and naturally will never lead to common good in this case.⁴ The worst scenario is that unfairness would spread out. If the right of the strongest is obeyed, other minority groups may face the same hardship—being marginalised. The next group being banished would be the elderly or the disabled.

3 According to Rousseau, the clauses of the social contract may be “reduced to one—the total alienation of each associate, together with all his rights, to the whole community.” He also observes, “each man, in giving himself to all, gives himself to nobody.” (392; bk. I, ch. VI)

4 General will considers the common interest and “remain[s] as the sum of the differences” whereas will of all represents a sum of particular wills and takes private interest into account. For in-depth explanation, please refer to Rousseau 401–402; bk. II, ch. III.

Some may argue that the patients would hurt other citizens as they cannot control themselves. As they violate preservation of the community, they ought to receive discriminating treatment as public enemies. Allow me to go back to the stigma mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The public are concerned that their own safety will be threatened. It is very natural since survival is always the most basic but important subject in life. Yet, the majority's thought is not necessarily true. Most patients are harmless. Less than 5% of them have violent behaviours, most of which are attributed to lack of adequate treatment (The Mental Health Association of Hong Kong, "Misunderstanding and Facts about Mental Illness"). The public perceive that mental patients "will" threaten public safety. It points out another problem. General will is not always correct due to insufficient information and communication.⁵ As a legislator, I have more access to related information, such as meetings with focus groups, and reports written on demand of the Legislative Council. Therefore, I am responsible to facilitate the decision-making process by spreading out information, but not blindly following the will of all so as to gain support in the next election of the Legislative Council. Otherwise, the dominating party will exploit the weak party for private interest (mental comfort), but not for common interest. If I blindly follow the will of all, I will be exchanging society welfare for personal advantage, which is totally violating my role as a facilitator.

Although the government promises to maintain the "normal life" of patients, the law exploits their right, which is against the social contract, the

⁵ See Rousseau 401–402; bk. II, ch. III. Even though general will can lead to common good, Rousseau admits its limitation. General will cannot be corrupted but probably would be deceived.

foundation of today's governor. It generates unfairness and conflicts between patients and public, between minority and majority, and possibly shakens the legitimate ruling of the government. The above discussion is from the social perspective. However, influences on patients should not be ignored.

Although the government claims to maintain a normal life as the outside for them, there is a huge difference. In the *Odyssey*, nymph Calypso provides more than everyday need and entertainment to Odysseus, she offers him immortality, wealth and herself. Yet, Odysseus misses his homeland Ithaca and his wife Penelope, “[h]is life [is] draining [out from] homesickness.” (Homer 36; bk. 5, line 150–157) Human being is social animal. We need family. We need friends. We need emotional support. Odysseus gives up glory offered by Calypso as he knows the price—he would be away from his close family forever. Thus, he insists to go home, a place which is familiar to him, to live with his trusted people. How about the patients? They would probably have the same feelings—homesick and miserable if they were put in an island far away from their family and friends. Forcing people to leave their beloved people is crude let alone these people strongly need emotional support. “One of the greatest helps to a friend or loved one with a mental illness is emotional support” (The University of Texas Harris County Psychiatric Center, “Understanding Mental Illness”). How can we take away mental support from the patients?

“Not In My Backyard,” a term suggested by Nicholas Ridley can help explain a bit. It states that the general public understands the need to build some facilities, which would bring some negative impacts, such as incinerator, rehabilitation centers as long as these are not built in their backyard or in their districts. This concept does not totally fit in this topic but it describes the common public attitude—“Don’t bother me.” As long as the

issue does not affect them, anything is fine. Yet, the traditional Confucian idea of humaneness tells us the reverse. What is the core value of humaneness? “Love others” (*The Analects* 12.22, 6.30). Understanding others’ situations with empathy and showing them care, but not just focusing on your own desire. What if you or your family are forced to live on an inhabited island? If we put ourselves in the patients’ shoes, I believe many of us will hesitate about the proposal. Personally, I will feel really sorry for the patients if the law finally gets passed, since the happiness (released from worry of safety) builds on the sadness of others (patients forced to leave their family). Once realising this, who could pass this law without feeling guilty?

The restriction against patients leaving the island is unreasonable since they can hardly recover totally in a closed environment. The Mental Health Association of Hong Kong supports the argument by stating that isolation is not the proper treatment to patients (“Misunderstanding and Facts about Mental Illness”). Long-term isolation hinders their recovery due to increasing reliance and low self-esteem. They cannot regain confidence in themselves through positive interaction with other community members, and therefore, may lose hope that they can get well and immerse in the community again. The hopelessness of being abandoned by the world pushes them into a worse scenario. We can imagine that many patients cannot reach the standard of “recovering totally.” Another challenge to the soundness of the plan is about how the government could handle the huge amount of patients. According to the Hospital Authority, around 1–1.7 million residents suffer from different levels of mental illness (17). That is approximately 1/7 of the Hong Kong population. If all of them are moved onto the island, the immediate consequences, such as labour loss and the subsequent effects, such as the maintenance cost of the island are

immeasurable. If the government has sufficient fund to build and maintain such an island, I wonder why it does not pour more resources into fundamental mental health services, such as prevention and out-patient service, which are less controversial but address the public panic. I believe the public will not go blindly against patients with mental illnesses if they know the patients are receiving proper medical treatment and are under professional's appraisal.

Therefore, moving patients onto an inhabited island is not beneficial for them. Since they would get depressed for having to leave their family and being isolated from the society, it would be an obstacle for them to recover. The rule that patients cannot leave the island unless they recover totally is not reasonable as the plan itself sets barrier on their way to cure. The plan is also a big question in practical term while considering the consequences and costs.

To conclude, I am against the proposal based on three considerations, including the negative impact on society, ethical concern and the reasonability of the suggestion. First, forcing patients with mental illness to move to an isolated island is unfair and the unfairness might spread out to other minority groups. Second, this act is crude and mean. Despite the fact that the government would maintain "normal life" for the majority outside, how about their family, lovers and close friends? Human-being is a social animal and need more than satisfying basic needs. Isolation stops them from normal interaction with other community members and causes them to feel miserable. Last but not least, isolation itself does not help patients recover, but drive them to a worse stage. Even though it gains such a huge public support, I will insist my choice. Public support reflects the will of the majority, but it does not necessarily lead to common good. As a member of the Legislative Council, I should try my best to protect the common good of the society.

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Teacher’s comment:

Chan Yee Lee’s essay is well written with clear presentation, strong arguments, and, most importantly, deep reflections on what social fairness is. I was very happy when I read Chan Yee Lee’s essay, not only because it shows her effort in understanding the texts (*The Social Contract*, *The Analects*, and *Odyssey*) and providing different related researches (e.g. local news and government reports), but also because of her moral attitude. As a teacher of humanity/general education, I am always eager to read a student essay that demonstrates academic ability and intellectual conscience, and, for me, Chan Yee Lee’s essay is one of such kind. (Li Chun Hong)