

My Dilemma

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Introduction

Yesterday was supposed to be a typically busy Friday. However, a dilemma and an extraordinary dream added spice to it and made it an unforgettable moment in my life.

It was 9 p.m., and my fast food restaurant was still crowded with hungry customers. As the owner of the restaurant, I was terribly exhausted. The situation was made worse as I was preoccupied with a dilemma. A property agent approached me that morning, persuading me to sell the business for HK\$40,000,000. This was a large sum of money, which I could never earn by selling lunchboxes. With it I could quit working and enjoy my remaining life. It was so tempting that I almost decided to sell the shop right away, until I went back to work and was met with my studious employees, whom I would really miss if I closed the business.

I worked for another hour before I had my belated dinner. I still could not start discussing the dilemma with my staff for fear that this would make them sad. I soon experienced a headache. Later, I lost my consciousness and fell onto the table.

Countless Pursuits: Which Is of the Most Importance?

After an unknown period of time, a distant voice came to my attention.

“You should not abandon your business, your virtue and your friendship! Money is nothing when compared with happiness,” said the voice.

I opened my eyes, but I could see nothing.

“Who are you?” I shouted towards the direction from which the voice came.

Subsequently, a glowing grey ball flew from nowhere and floated in front of me. I was so scared. I tried to escape but I could not exert any force on the ground. It seemed that I was floating in the universe.

“I am Aristotle from the ancient Greece,” the ball said, “I am here to help you solve your dilemma.”

I had no choice but to listen.

Virtue as the Supreme Good of Life

“First of all, we should talk about the *telos*,” Aristotle stated. “By selling the business, you want to become a millionaire and live a rich life. However, I feel obliged to remind you that wealth is not the supreme good of your life. In my opinion, happiness, defined by an activity of the soul in accordance with the best and most perfect virtue in a complete lifetime (13–14; bk. 1, ch. 7, line 1098a16–21), is the ultimate end of life (11; bk. 1, ch. 7, line 1097b1–2).”

“Excuse me, but what do you mean by ‘supreme good’ or ‘ultimate end’? Isn’t wealth what most of us pursue throughout our lifetime?” I inquired.

“Indeed,” said Aristotle, “Wealth is a lifelong end for many people, but is it the supreme good? The supreme good should be self-sufficient. It is

something that ‘by itself makes life choiceworthy and in need of nothing’ (12; bk. 1, ch. 7, line 1097b16). Will wealth alone make life desirable? The answer is obviously in the negative. But by practising virtue, you can have a sophisticated state of mind that makes you happy and satisfied. Confucius, the Chinese philosopher, has a similar viewpoint. ‘Poverty and obscurity are what men detest; but unless it can be brought about in the right way, they are not to be abandoned. If a man of honour forsakes Virtue how is he to fulfil the obligations of his name! (*The Analects* 4.5)’”

I felt quite insulted as it seemed that selling my business, which was my right, and becoming rich were equivalent to a lack of virtue. Even if I became rich, I would still be myself! I would not become a bad person just because I was rich.

Aristotle was probably able to read my mind, as he said, “Once you sell your shop, you will lose your virtue of studiousness. Virtue is neither inborn nor permanent; it has to be gained and maintained by practice (27, bk. 2, ch. 1, 1103b7–18). So when you stop working and embark on a lax life, you inevitably lose your hard-working quality. Of course, being rich will definitely give you pleasure, something desirable, but it is not an adequate end (7; bk. 1, ch. 5, line 1096a7–10). If pleasure is what we ultimately want, what is the difference between man and animal? It follows that wealth is just a means of pleasure. While Adam Smith, the peculiar Scottish economist, treats universal opulence as an end in his book *The Wealth of Nations*, I insist that virtue is by far a more superior aim. You should never abandon your virtue.”

Moderation is Key

“Running the business is so tiring. If I keep working like this, I will never be happy!” I argued.

It took Aristotle a while to think, and the glowing ball was revolving vertically just like the cursor on a Windows 7 computer.

“I just observed your life in the past twenty years,” said Aristotle. “Your business was initially small, but as the reputation of the business was gradually developed, you opened three branches and lengthened the opening hours to earn more money. In other words, you increased your own workload. In fact, moderation is a key in virtue; either excessiveness or deficiency can ruin your virtue, just like the effect of physical exercise on one’s health (28; bk. 2, ch. 2, 1104a12–19). Therefore, I think you should be hard-working, but not excessively so. For example, you can employ more people to help you. Then, you can have your free time with your family and do what you want. Hence, work does not deprive you of happiness; your choice does.”

Friendship as Another Decisive Factor

“Friendship with your employees is another thing that you will forgo if you dismiss your work force,” Aristotle continued. “Friendship is indispensable from life as it is the most common and commendable way to realise beneficence (163; bk. 8, ch. 1, line 1155a7–9). Admittedly, the friendship between you and your workers is largely based on utility, as they need to earn a living while you need them to help run the business. But as time flies, don’t you find that they are hard-working and reliable? They work till late night just as you do. In your local culture, it’s not uncommon that employers of small businesses call their workers ‘brothers,’ since they care for each other. Once you close your business, your employees will have no choice but to find other jobs. Their hard-working virtue retains but yours diminishes. With a different level of virtue, it is impossible to maintain friendship, as the two parties have different feelings about each other. (193;

bk. 9, ch. 3, line 1165b23–31) Secondly, the utility side of friendship obviously breaks as they cannot gain interest from you. Thirdly, since ‘nothing is so characteristic of friends as spending time together’ (171, bk. 8, ch. 5, line 1157b20), friendship couldn’t be realised (173; bk. 8, ch. 5, line 1157b11). As a result, you will no longer be their friends.”

Counteracting Alienation

Immediately after Aristotle’s speech, a red ball popped out.

“Hi Aristotle, I just heard the name of Smith. He’s a great guy!” said the red ball. “Greetings, Marx. We’re just talking about a dilemma. Are you interested?” Aristotle asked.

A splash of light was sent from the grey to the red.

“Interesting,” Marx said. “As a critic of Capitalism, I found it awkward to give advice, but I think you should keep your property.”

“Isn’t Marxism all about abolishing private properties?” I was puzzled.

“Let me explain,” said Marx.

Alienated Labour

“The economy in the contemporary world is largely based on Smith’s Capitalism, as history has proven its efficiency over Socialism and Communism.” Marx sighed before he continued, “As I foresaw in my *1844 Manuscripts*, several large ‘capitalists,’ or corporations, dominated the fast food industry in Hong Kong. This is a bad phenomenon as they no longer need to compete for workers, while workers have to compete for jobs fiercely, causing overwork and hence premature death (Marx 462). Luckily, Hong Kong has a good social security system that protects workers from beggary, but the hegemony of those big businesses still does more

harm than good to the population. One remedy is to increase the number of capitalists, which is what you should do. By maintaining competition, the power of those big fast food businesses can be controlled. Then, it is hoped that the working class can have more bargaining power and live better lives.”

“If you close your business, another Fairwood, Café de Coral or McDonald’s will take up your market share,” Marx explained, “and alienation of labour will be more significant. As you probably know, the extent of division of labour was unbearably high in those businesses. The siu-mei chefs only cut and serve siu-mei; the cleaning staff just collects trays and wipes tables. They are like machines. They are alienated from the productive activity as their work is not part of their nature; they are just economically forced to work for someone else (467). This causes an even more disastrous form of alienation, the alienation among men (471). Such alienation arouses social conflicts. While the universal education system in Hong Kong helps enhance social mobility, those who succeed are still the minority. The children of many other workers are still bound to be workers, and the struggle continues.”

Freedom and Joy

“It seems that you just focus on society,” I doubted. “What about me?”

“You can find joy in your work,” said Marx, “as you demonstrated that division of labour is not necessary for productivity. According to the data from Aristotle, you are an all-rounder in your business. You can do almost all parts of work well. As a boss, you are also not required to stay at one position. This makes you conscious and free, which are essential for a species-being (469). You want to live freely and happily, don’t you?”

“Yes, happiness is the ultimate aim of life, do you remember?” Aristotle interrupted. “Oh, my favourite tragic play is about to begin! I hope you’ll sort out what you really desire, instead of being obscured by greed. See you later!”

Conclusion

Then, the two glowing balls rushed towards me and I felt that I was falling into the brightest centre of the combined ball. I realised that I was in a hospital, surrounded by nobody.

Seizing this invaluable tranquillity to think, I knew what I ought to do. With a large sum of money, I can buy anything save for happiness, virtue and friendship, all of which are so precious that I cannot afford to lose. After all, life is way more than making money.

Works Cited

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Teacher's comment:

The story does not begin with a dramatic opening, but it serves well to introduce the issue of concern (to sell or not to sell) and to set the scene for an imaginary conversation.

Kei Wing's charm as a storyteller shows when Mr Lau, an actual figure reported in local news, comes alive as one who is overworked and tempted by the promise of quick cash. There are also thinkers from the past who appear as talking balls that fly, rotate, and beam each other their thoughts. The dialogues are cleverly shaped such that the advice given through the personae of Aristotle and Marx is challenged with typical Hong Kong values, such as: "selling my business...[is] my right."

Most importantly, the two thinkers' ideas are applied to a real-life situation with originality and insights. Aristotle addresses Mr Lau's existential dilemma from the perspective of *telos*, virtue, and friendship. Marx reminds Mr Lau of his responsibility to counteract alienation on a personal and societal level. The essay is an effective attempt to integrate the two thinkers without creating a theoretical tension between them. Even the sidetracking makes one smile, when Aristotle quotes approvingly from Confucius and corrects Smith's emphasis on universal opulence. (Julie Chiu)