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An Open Letter to Anand Giridharadas: A World of Equal Cooperation and Appreciation of Collective Effort

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Dear Mr. Giridharadas,

After listening to the podcast “When the Market Is Our Only Language”, your ideas inspired me to explore the question of “how to live together.” Therefore, in this open letter, I aim to propose an informed vision of how we, as a society, can live together in our world today. Ultimately, after engaging with the respective ideas of Marx and Hanh, I believe that the exercise of equal cooperation and greater appreciation towards collective effort best advances our world closer to achieve the ideal of being able to genuinely live together.

To be coherent, I will first contextualize the discussion in relation to the money-driven individualistic world we live in today. Subsequently, I will consider the idea of a need to have an operation of equal cooperation rather than an operation of unequal exploitation. Lastly, I will examine the idea of needing society to better appreciate the value of collective effort as opposed to idolizing individual strength.

Contextualization of the World Today

In order to comprehensively explore the question of “how to live together,” it is first crucial to situate this issue to the world we live in today. As presently constituted, our modern society is a materialistic money-driven world where people are becoming more individualistic. In such a world therefore, there has been the popularization, prioritization, and normative acceptance of a money-driven consequentialist attitude of society. In other words, it can be said that principled thinking is now dead. Not surprisingly, like you mentioned in the podcast, “when it [money as the focus] becomes the only way of thinking about the right thing to do” (Tippett), there are some major resulting defects that hinder the goal of cohabitation amongst members of society. Such divisive problems will be considered alongside the ideas of possible solutions derived from the two thinkers of Marx and Hanh.

A World that Works Equally

In the “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” Marx can be said to provide a “negative definition” of how we can live together. To clarify what I mean by a “negative definition,” the text suggests to us “what not to do” if we are to live together as opposed to a “positive definition” that suggests to us “what to do” if we are to live together. Specifically, the idea of “estrangement of man from man” (Marx 196) illustrates a depiction of society that we must avoid. Here, through the concept of “estrangement,” Marx demonstrates how the workers (i.e. proletariats) are treated as “objects” for the sole betterment of the capitalists (i.e. bourgeoisies). With the labor

of workers becoming “an ever cheaper commodity . . . the devaluation of the human world grows . . . [which] produces itself and the workers as a commodity” (190–191). It is evident that there is a clear emphasis on the conception of the workers as an inferior commodity, a tool, a material, rather than as equal human beings. Furthermore, because the workers are a commodity of labor for the capitalists that control the “objectification of labor,” the workers are fundamentally subjected “under the rule, coercion, and yoke of another man” (198). The tone and mood of Marx’s words that demonstrate the distressing state of the workers during mid-19th century Europe, provokes a vivid sense of oppression that was being perpetrated at the time. As such, Marx provides us with the idea that if we are to genuinely live together, we must avoid the action of exploiting certain people for our own wellbeing by conceiving them as inferior tools or commodities.

From this analysis, we can understand that even in our current 21st century society, Marx’s negative definition still bears truth to expose the fact that we are not genuinely living together. Due to our society adopting an economic consequentialist attitude, in the specific context of an employer-employee relationship, there is a tendency for employers to conceive their employees as mere tools because adhering to a cold and rigid consequentialist mindset offers more economic benefits than adhering to a warm and flexible principled mindset. Such a phenomenon could explain the unreasonable treatment that fellow humans inflict on one another in this specific context. For example, though not always the case, the main reason why an employer fires his/her employee is because that employee’s “output” is not as efficient as it once was or because it can be replaced with different personnel that has an “upgraded skill-set.” In more crude terms, that employee is seen merely as an old rusty tool that needs replacing.

Crucially, Hanh's commentary on "The Way of Understanding" in the *Heart Sutra* provides an important insight as to the grim consequence of indifference to those humans perceived as mere tools. If we want to "really" understand each other, Hanh states that we must "feel their feelings, suffer their suffering, and rejoice in their joy" (123). However, using the above employer-employee context, this is predicated on the fact that the employer actually views his/her employee as a fellow equal human. In the instance where the employer assumes his/her employee merely as a tool for his/her own benefit, the employer cannot embark on Hanh's method of understanding and the employee should not embark on expecting such a hopeful act of empathy. How can an inorganic object have a feeling, suffering, or joy for another human to feel, suffer, and rejoice in? It is impossible. As such, it is reasonable to deduce that once conceived as an inorganic, inanimate tool for the purpose of exploitation, it would be unrealistic to expect improved treatment over time. Only the grim future of exacerbated indifference and callousness awaits these unfortunate exploited people.

Therefore, before any further analysis, it appears that we fail to live together in two different senses. In one sense, we fail to live together since we exploit other fellow humans as a commodity for our personal gain. This being the case, in another sense, we fail to live together because we fundamentally lack compassion and become indifferent to those humans conceived as a commodity.

Accordingly, by engaging with both Marx and Hanh's thoughts, we can derive the idea of a need to have "equal cooperation" to remedy the issue of unequal exploitation and better live together in our world today. By treating people as a commodity, the production of their labor "stands opposed to [them] as something alien" (Marx 191). Consequently, these people become "disconnected" to their work. Thus, what we must do is to

make these workers become “connected” to their work, make their labor as something “part of them and not alien to them.” Here is where the idea of equal cooperation can be derived. The definition of cooperation is to work together “for the same end.” So, the aim and outcome of labor is not to solely benefit an exclusive few, implying that the laborers are exploited, but rather the labor depends upon an equal relationship and agreement of collaboration as fellow respective humans for the benefit of all people that contribute to the work. In this sense, even when the employer directs the employee on what to do, this is not an act directed with the intention of exploitation but rather an act directed to genuinely advance towards the same shared goal. Hence, when we work in cooperation we stop seeing these other people as tools to achieve our own objective and instead see these other people as fellow absolutely necessary companions striving to achieve the same objective.

An interesting implication of this idea could be hypothesized in the context of a company’s hiring process. Normally, there is much weight given to the criteria of an applicant’s GPA because it can be “mis-applied” to indicate how much of a “useful tool” he or she can be to the operation of “my” business. However, now, when companies aim for equal cooperation, the criteria of the applicant’s personal goals, personal ambitions, or personal philosophy may be given the most weight during the hiring process in order to discover an employee who best coincides with what “we” as a company aim to achieve.

A World that Appreciates Collective Effort

Alongside the idea of equal cooperation, the idea of appreciating collective effort allows us to have a more nuanced and holistic vision of

“how to live together.” Another problem of today’s world is that because we are a money-driven society that emphasizes the idea of personal property and personal wealth, our society has become much more individualistic. As such, individual success stories receive the most media attention and are then preached to the mass. For example, in countless of movies and documentaries Steve Jobs is solely credited as the man behind Apple’s revolutionary success story when in reality it was through the help of others, such as Steve Wozniak or Chris Espinosa, that Jobs was even able to launch Apple in the first place. The problem of this phenomenon in relation to the discussion at hand, is that we fail to better “live together” because we come to idolize individual strength as opposed collective cooperation, which encourages for a more self-centered and ego-centric society to be nurtured.

The consequence of such a phenomenon can be linked back to Marx’s concept of estrangement. When we as a society become more self-centered and ego-centric, this, in turn, further undermines our goal to live together because we come to not appreciate the help of others, or, in the worst-case scenario, we reject help because we think that the notion of “help from others” is a sign of weakness. In such a world therefore, the idea of team-work and collaboration will be sneered upon. Here, like the workers estranged from their own labor, those “role-playing” people who help within a team, will likely be estranged of their contribution to the project if not appreciated and disdained upon.

Accordingly, the concept of “emptiness” and “interbeing” within the *Heart Sutra* directly confronts the mistaken belief to credit our inherent “selves,” and instead encourages us to appreciate the not-so-obvious collective effort “behind the surface.” The idea of “emptiness” will inform us that it is deluded to think that there is a “self” that we can glorify to

explain our privilege or despair. Hanh states that “[n]o matter how wonderful something is, when we look deeply into it, we see that there is nothing in it we can identify as a separate self” (121), rather we are simply constituted through the five skandhas that are subject to the influence of the environment that surrounds us. Instead, what really explains our current “state of affairs” can be better understood through the concept of “interbeing.” Hanh states that “to be is to inter-be” (119). Here, the idea is that “things” are not “absolute,” but is formed through a process of being necessarily interdependent of various factors. Therefore, like Hanh’s example of seeing the logger, the mill, the wheat, the logger’s parents and so on “behind the sheet of paper” (119), when we see an individual’s success, we can see for example, his/her co-workers that help his/her professional life, we see the company that provides the resources for his/her project, we see his/her family members that support him/her and so on. Hence, it is not the individual that should be idolized, but rather the background people that had made this individual’s success possible that should be in the spotlight.

In turn, by appreciating collective effort, we can better live together within our world today. The rejection of individualistic success to emphasize and encourage a collective form of success conveys the message that we cannot achieve anything substantial without the cooperation with others. After such a reflection, we become less egocentric, more modest, and come to the understanding that it is not “I,” but “We” that should be treasured.

Are We to Also be Blamed? Who Must Act?

On a further note, Marx’s text implicitly suggests that these “exploited people” and “background people” are not complete victims without any fault. Though not explicit, when describing the idea of “estrangement

of man from man,” the tone and mood of the text not only critiques the capitalists for exploiting the workers, but also implicitly attacks these estranged workers for allowing themselves to be exploited, stating that “[j]ust as he creates his own production as a loss of reality, . . . , so he *creates* (emphasis added) the domination of the non-producer, . . . , just as he estranges from himself his own activity, so he *confers* (emphasis added) upon the stranger an activity which does not belong to him” (Marx 198). Thus, through the use of words such as “creates” or “confers” which suggests a degree of volition on the part of the workers, Marx insinuates that these exploited workers have their share of the blame. We can extract and apply this same perspective to the unappreciated and ignored “background people” of our world. Moreover, as the two specifically identified words suggest a degree of volition, Marx’s text could also be interpreted to provide a practical suggestion on how to materialize the ideas discussed above, namely, to stop creating or conferring the existing state of affairs and instead take our own affirmative action to change the narrative of society to operate under a scheme of equal cooperation and greater appreciation of collective effort. If we don’t do anything, then as Marx insinuates, nothing will change.

Conclusion

The goal of this letter is not to provide a definite answer to this timeless question, but rather to provide some degree of treatment that can better advance our world one step closer to achieving this ideal. Therefore, by no means do I assert that the issues identified and remedies suggested above are absolute answers. Nevertheless, by engaging with the respective ideas

of both Marx and Hanh, I hope you can find merit in my informed vision of living together through equal cooperation rather than exploitation, and the appreciation of collective strength rather than individual strength.

Yours sincerely,

A student from The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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Teacher's comment:

BAE's work presents a vision of what it means to live together. It is well informed by ideas from the past. It also shows sensitivity toward the present world, which he takes upon to analyze with a sense of urgency and conviction. The argument engages with established ideas in a detailed and nuanced manner. It is also well integrated in that each thinker sheds light on the other within the careful framing of the argument. BAE's voice comes through as he takes up a specific position, risking going against more well circulated ideas to make a case for social change. This civic-mindedness and sense of justice in re-defining the notion of success so that it is more inclusive and caring are thought provoking and inspiring in times of tribulation. (YEUNG Yang)