

The Meaning of Life and Self-actualization: Understanding ASEAN

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Abstract

Achieving the meaning of life is the purpose of each individual, but what is the meaning of life and how to get it can be analyzed through the cultural situationism. By contrasting the ways to the meaning of life from Karl Marx's perspective and Confucius' perspective, Marx constructs dialectical materialism, in which he envisions the Communism. Through changing of the economic and politic system of Capitalism, people get freedom and have self-actualization. Meanwhile, Confucianism devotes enculturation to the existing society, through education, people can get the meaning of life. With the methodology of logic and the explanation of culture based on 4TIS, the uniqueness of the choice of individual and the developing of organization can be better understood and the diversity of cultures also can be recognised. The conclusion is: 1) The meaning of life is only defined by subject; 2) The self-actualization is determined by the subject and its cultural situation; and 3) The developing way of a society or a group depends on subjects' cultural recognition and their traditions.

Keywords: The meaning of life, Self-actualization, Dialectical-materialism, Confucianism, Enculturation.

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ASEAN is a political and economic organization that aims to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development. It also promotes the protection of regional peace and stability, and opportunities for member countries to discuss differences peacefully. For these aims, it is necessary to create an in-depth understanding of the member cultures, traditions and current trajectories.

The most important part of this "in depth understanding" is to understand both of the unique and the common values of its 10 member states. With such an understanding progress will be possible. A means to help member states understand their unique and shared values should be elevated as an urgent and critical priority for ASEAN. It is possible for people to understand the developing ways and the individual values of ASEAN through the cultural situationism.

1. The Meaning of Life Based on Culture

To all individuals, the meaning and purpose of life is based on the values they hold to be true. There are many such values and understandings such as the meaning of justice, the basis of equality, an understanding of freedom, the importance of perseverance, the role of tolerance and the role of humility. The acquisition of some of these values can take place in an instant and in other cases a lifetime is required. Confucius said, "A man of benevolence and lofty ideals should not, at the expense of benevolence, cling cravenly to life instead of braving death. He will, on the contrary, lay down his life for the accomplishment of benevolence."* According to Confucius, the meaning of life can be understood and supported only if the individual makes sure the value is worthy. On the other hand, the Constitution of the Communist Party of China requires members to take an admission oath in front of the party flag, and say:

"It is my will to join the Communist Party of China, to uphold the party's program, to observe the provisions of the party constitution, to fulfill a party member's duties, to carry out the party's decisions, to strictly observe the party's regulations and discipline, to keep the party's documents confidential, to be loyal to the party, to work hard, to fight for communism throughout my life, to be ready at all times to sacrifice my all for the party and the people, and never betray the party."

If one is a member of CPC, he shall devote his whole life to achieve his meaning of life through service to the party, its ideals and values. No matter whether does the moment decision make the meaning of life realized, or through his whole life, an individual makes him self-actualization, both are accepted by people.

Following are the two conflicting examples of the understanding of the pursuit of life and its purpose. Most common people just want to have an "ideal and happy life" and this defines the meaning of life and their purpose for living. Although it is difficult to define the concept of happiness and most of the people who expose to this as a goal cannot do this, still it can be stated as the purpose of living.

"Granville Hicks once said: "the object of life is to satisfy as many appetencies [feeling of craving something] as possible".

To Hicks and to many common people, to satisfy these appetencies is the purpose of life and gives life its meaning. But an appetite is just a feeling of craving something. For example, (1) People who are truly driven by their appetencies will go to any lengths to satisfy their craving. This is especially true for those addicted to drugs. (2) Other people may be driven by a craving for personal fame or glory. Craving for the drug will likely result in illegal acts, whereas craving for personal glory may be approved by the standard of morality. Both are values but one is perceived as moral and the

other is not. However, if the craving for fame is based on evil motivation or if illegal means are used to achieve it, then the craving for personal glory may lose any moral basis that it has had. While Granville Hicks tried to find out the meaning of life, he only found out Man's physiological needs. He looked upon men as animals, and in the process of finding out the meaning of life, he ignored the social dimension of an individual's life. He entirely missed the key meaning of life. In this sense, Granville Hicks' concepts are not acceptable as they lack the human conception. If man is a type of animal, then he needs only to satisfy his appetencies, his physical needs and other cravings. But Man is not an animal. Man is a unique specie, he is not God, and he is not an animal -- he is himself. Man not only needs material satisfaction, but also spiritual satisfaction. The foundational value of a human being is human dignity and social nature. These provide the value of life.

But how can we understand the meaning of life? How can we best understand human dignity and social nature ? Different cultures have different ways of understanding or responding to these fundamental questions. For instance, from the Buddhist point of view, discarding worries and gaining happiness are natural abilities and necessary attributes of every human being. To believe in Buddhism and to follow the Buddhist path are the primary means to fulfill and to understand the meaning of life. A Christian starts with a belief in original sin, what he works towards in his life is, to obtain God's forgiveness. There are many other faiths, modern or traditional, home or foreign and all of the followers of these religions understand the meaning of life in different ways and work towards the fulfillment of their lives by different methods. Beyond the religious perspectives on life, there are many different cultural contexts. Each of these will result in different models and strategies to achieve and understand the meaning of life.

2. Self-actualization based on the 4TIS model

In order to further analyze the meaning of life, the concept of self-actualization can be studied from the standpoint of self-actualization, and that the meaning of life is self-cognition based on the cultural context. Here, the self-cognition means that individuals have the inborn capability of awareness of their existence, including their own behavior and social identity and conception of context, and each of the individuals can put his own meaning into practice by means of the living experience and self-evaluation. Here, "self-actualization" is the process of finding one's "life meaning" which is a personalized understanding of the meaning of life. (This is different from A. H. Maslow (1943)'s hierarchy of needs which culminates or results in self-actualized people. Here self-actualization is a process not an end.)

People choose to live or die, and how they wish to approach that life or death. In the same way that Confucius or a member of the CPC's make a conscious choice, all people choose their own life-styles too. In this way, self-actualization is process that all humans use to understand and give meaning to life. The crucial factors of self-actualization can be called the "4TIS' model" which is composed of the individual, the tradition(or context), the way of thinking, time, technology and space. The 4TIS model provides the framework or the conception of people's situation. This conception is composed of subjective elements and is, therefore, subjective in nature. It is a subjective concept constructed out of subjective elements. The 4TIS model can be defined as follows:

- I. The individual is a specific living carrier of life, who is created in biologic kinship with and from a set of parents, with a cultural inheritance and who also creates himself and his own context.

II. The concept of tradition refers to the conventions and is the living customs of a given community, which is explained and practiced creatively by the individual.

III. The concept of mentality (or the manner of thinking) which is a quite specific thinking method of the individual, which shows his focus and structure of thought. The oral or written language reflects the way of thinking of the language community is in itself a thinking habit. There are different practices of linguistic expressions in different languages.

IV. The concept of technology is the existing tools, methods and purposes that a society or individual uses. The meaning of the technology plays an important role from a historical perspective and has specific individual meaning.

V. The concept of time is a kind of timing standard used by different cultures. In Christian-based cultures this concept or understanding is quite different from the meaning it has to 'Buddhists', which again is different from 'Marxists'. The emperor chronology of China is also different from the Gregorian calendar.

VI. The concept of space is defined by the sphere of people's activities and their imaginations. Americans' conception of space is different from Chinese, which is also different from Africans'.

Thus the individual's personal subjectivity (or nature) is created by the conception of time, space, individual ways of thinking, tradition and technology of an individual. But this subjectivity also gives life its meaning and explains the process of self-actualization chosen by specific individuals or groups of individuals. Through the careful observation of life and through introspection, the elements of 4TIS can be found. In this way the individual is the carrier of all possibilities, for each specific human being is the special carrier of many human traits. All the imagines of human beings are based on other individuals, who are just the form of which the subject is created.

As the basis or form of a subject, originates from an individual's tradition, then it follows that an individual's characteristics are created by the customs and the conception of space and time, by the ways of thinking and by the technology used by the culture at a given point in time. All of these can be called the cultural situationism. In the situation, the 4TIS influence each other and connect together to form the individuals' subjectivity. In everyday use, these different individual subjectivities spontaneously gather as an aggregation in the creation of various subjects. These aggregated subjective elements constitute an anthropic subject. Furthermore, if any one of the 4TIS elements changes, then the whole concept of life will change. For instance, the mobile phone (as a technological part of the 4TIS model) can and does change people's sense of the time and space. This in turn change the way people think. The changes to how people think changes people's behavior. The change in behavior influences the present and future tradition and the culture and customs of a given society. This change of tradition impacts people's life styles and even their happiness and freedom. Therefore any change of the 4TIS will influence the understanding of purpose of life and will impact the method and degree of accomplishing self-actualization.

From the model of 4TIS, we may understand more about the meaning of life and about the process of self-actualization. There are two examples that will be illustrated here.

3. The Accomplishing Way of Life Meaning and Self-actualization from Karl Marx.

One example is Karl Marx's viewpoint on the meaning of life and self-actualization. He was born on May the 5th, 1818. His father was a Jew and a practicing lawyer in Germany. While on a journey to France and Britain,

he witnessed the decisive power of capitalism. He also experienced the British and French economic crisis of serious consequence that prevailed in various fields. In an increasingly divided society, spontaneously, the bourgeois and proletarian were formed. The religious tradition was changed, new technology was used, the conception of time and space was enlarged, and the thinking shifted. Many individuals had the inner conflicts and contradictions. People did not know what was the true meaning of life. The European countries were controlled by a tremendous capital machine, which had no mercy for the workers of the time. Human beings lost the essence of being human. No one felt genuinely happy, and no one was truly free. According to the tradition of religion, the belief in God lost its holiness and could not relieve people's suffering. The authority and sacredness of God were replaced by capital and its owners. The change of tradition is so striking and intense that the famous novelist Charles Dickens wrote:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. We had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way".

When the tradition was changed, the concept of time and space turned into confusion. All the old skills were of no help in dealing with the existing problems. No one could find out the correct way of thinking and they could no more use the traditional thinking methods to solve the current problems. Each individual lost in his own alienation trap. Based on the traditional western logic and the great change of times, Karl Marx came to

the conclusion of the necessity of revolution, the demise of capitalism and establishment of communism.

In Karl Marx's viewpoint, if one wants to understand the meaning of life and wants to undertake the process of self-actualization, he needs a supportive society. If there is not such a supportive society, then people need to create a revolution to set up such a society, and in the process of revolution, people will understand the meaning of life and the methods and process of self-actualization. About this, Marx said:

"there shall be an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all".

Here, Marx's dialectics must be used to create conditions in the society so that everyone can achieve self-actualization. Self-actualization and community-actualization are interdependent. The latter is required for the former to be enabled.

The precondition of self-actualization is the development of society. In the society, obviously, the freedom of an individual is necessary to realize the meaning of life, which can be achieved in the situation of free development. In this context, freedom of the individual is no longer controlled by anything else. The development can be the act of improving the quality of life and making sure everyone has the right to determine what life looks like. The vision and range of possibilities is widened through the combined effort of local people, international bodies, governments and a variety of civil society, organizations such as NGOs, community organizations and religious groups. But in class society, (particularly in capitalism) according to Marx's concept, human beings had no freedom, for people were trapped by purely biological needs. But purely biological needs are not the only appetencies of people. People need spiritual satisfaction, but they cannot get it in the existing society. In this sense, people could not exercise free development of themselves. Not only the

individuals were without free development, but also the people's organizations could not choose freely. Therefore, human beings were defined by their history.

Karl Marx undertook further research on the capitalism and he found why people could not have this free development. He found the alienation of capitalism. Here, alienation is, thus, a denial of creative human potentiality, the dehumanization of the subject and an obstacle to the building of a truly human community. Alienation becomes a process in which humanity is progressively turned into a stranger in a world created by labor. So by locating alienation with economic and material elements Marx defined it as an historical but not universal (or natural) state.

Accordingly, freedom is the right and capacity of people to determine their own actions, in a community which is able to provide for the full development of human potentiality. Freedom may be enjoyed by individuals but only in and through the community. Marx envisions an ideal society the so-called Communism society. With the proletarian revolution, people could gain their freedom.

Up to now, alienation in existing societies is ineluctable. It is a product and result of our history. In other words, alienation is in itself determinative by the developments of economic and politic status in capitalism, which lead to the system of exploitation of man by man. As a result, there exist income inequality, wealth inequality, global inequality and racial inequality. Credit Suisse numbers released in October 2010 show that the richest 0.5 percent of global adults hold well over a third of the world's wealth. Capitalism has such an overwhelming influence on today's life in the economic globalization and it leads to a growing economic crisis and resultant unemployment worldwide. This in turn leads to the collapse of many societies. The cyclical economic crises is inherent in capitalism. Because of the basic contradiction of capitalism: the inherent antagonism of

the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the fate of capitalism is an inevitable demise. Theoretically, the alienation of labor and the basic contradiction of capitalism lead to the premise of a realization of socialism in which people can have their free development, and people have the rights to choose their jobs, where working is a happy thing and self-actualizations can take place.

However, so far capitalism has not reached this end point. The model of 4TIS' shows that self-actualization and the development of Society is a gradual process. It has its own self-healing and this self-healing can improve the elements inside of the 4 TIS. It shows that the happiness of human beings is historical and specific, not abstract. The desires of gaining happiness and discarding worries are subjective and specific. In order to avoid conflict and reduce tension, individuals, organizations and bourgeoisie are obliged to deal rationally within their mutual relationship for their own profits. Furthermore, the governments of capitalism have constantly, gradually and automatically practiced self-alignment for mutual convenience and for protection. These are the reasons why capitalism does not fail quickly.

Moreover, individual differences in human intelligence are essential. The abilities of human beings are different, and the conatus also differ greatly. The organizational developments that mankind has employed are very complicated. Therefore, the history of human development is complex, just as Engels' viewpoint:

"History is made in such a way that the final result always arises from conflicts between many individual wills, of which each in turn has been made what it is by a host of particular conditions of life. Thus there are innumerable intersecting forces, an infinite series of parallelograms of forces which give rise to one result-the historical event".

In spite of these, Capitalism features its nature based on the production for profit and the endless accumulation of capital, which is unchangeable.

"The operation and the expansion of the existing world system thus depend on a set of historical conditions that help to secure low environmental cost, low wage cost, and low taxation cost. However, the operations of capitalism follow certain dynamics or 'laws of motion' that in the long run tend to raise all of these costs. As these costs rise beyond a certain point, the capitalist system is no longer profitable and the ceaseless accumulation of capital will have to come to an end."

In Marx's view, capitalism cannot give the people the equal rights to develop themselves freely, neither will it give all nations equal opportunities to develop their own economy or specific cultures.

Historically, the capitalist world-economy makes a global uneven division in human resources, raw material, environment and techniques. Most of the global wealth is in the possession by the globe's most affluent individuals. Although the world is moving further toward multi-polarization, world marketing leads to a continuing global imbalance, and then leads to regional imbalance. In the world-economy system, the developed countries consume the most of raw materials and world-wealth, when the developing and underdeveloped countries still have to expend large amounts of money to support the largest population. The developed countries have controlled of the largest capital, which makes most of the technologies owned by only a few entities and individuals. How can we change this uneven economic imbalance? Part of the solution is for the developing and underdeveloped countries to establish communities of interest. This is the reason why the Association of Southeast Asian Nations was established.

According to Marx's, the nature of capital and profits, lead the owners of capital go to any length to obtain highest ROI (return of investment). This leads to global imbalance, the developing and undeveloped countries are obliged to accept such a division of the world economy that they have to provide the high cost of low price products because they lack advanced techniques. People have to accept the fate of the labor alienation for this unreasonable social-economic division. Periodic economic crisis is the inevitable outcome of the capitalist system. Everyone may be obsessed with the fear of unemployment. Thus from the capitalist system, it is difficult for people to develop themselves freely, and neither is it easy to accomplish their self-actualization. Marx criticized the capitalist system in order to set up a more reasonable and a more humane society. In this sense, Marx changed capitalism and changed the existing world order. If it were not for Karl Marx, there would be no welfare systems in western societies.

4. The Way of Discovering the Meaning of Life and Self-actualization from Confucius.

Karl Marx's critique of capitalism is profound, "however, a variety of other patterns of society exist as shown by the 4TIS model. Here, the time, space, individual body, way of thinking, tradition and technology are always explained by an individual and his kinship groups or living background.

Therefore through the 4TIS, the definition of a human being can be understood. Human beings are within these situations and as a result, the "so called" freedom of human beings is limited and relative. There is no absolute freedom! Freedom must be acknowledged and be based upon the law of nature and society. Within this context, people exercise their freedom of producing activities. There is also free choice within political

society. To master the law of nature and society is the basis of the meaning of life and self-actualization. This is the way to understand the meaning of life. So Marx designed Communism for people with this in mind.

In contrasting to Marx's theory, Confucius thought society should keep a certain stability. What people could do was to correct the process of society's developments to constantly improve people's happiness. So in the Confucian perspective, human being's freedom is given, and people gain it through understanding the customs and regulations of society. In this situation, people can have their own meaning and undertake a process of self-actualization. This choice of freedom is decided by each individuals situation.

From the Confucian perspective, the structure of Society is similar to the structure of Heaven. As an example, the regulation and structure of society is not easily changed, so an individual should first understand the society and to gain his social identity. In Chinese traditional literature, the Confucian's four books Sishu (四书) is most important for an intellectual from the Sung to the Qing Dynasty. This classical literature was used not only to teach students, but also were regarded as the foundation for choosing officials, but most importantly, the spirit of these books had a close connection to each individual of the society. This traditional backdrop gives society the form of subject: the concept of time, such as the common time of the emperor calendar or Confucius' private time, which is the recognition of individual's taking position or enculturation of age-growing. it Also, gives the concept of space, for example, the concept of family is a spatial conception, people will have a self-actualization from family to the world (Tianxi, 天下). Through this process, individuals will realize the value of morality, they will learn to serve others and write the classical literature showing their eternal spiritual life (不朽), which in turn can be used to reject "the death of bodies". The way of thinking of Confucians is a

kind of collective-centered thinking habit with individual's inner awareness. The technology was mainly the skill of administration with some basic living techniques. On the basis of 4TIS for the Chinese traditional society, the individual's self-cultivation plays a more important role than the design of society system does, and therefore, China has a long and stable social structure. The Chinese traditional culture determines the meaning of life and the process of self-actualization.

The Great learning of Sishu also gives the meaning of life and the steps of self-actualization. This paper makes "the affirmation of accepted values and norms of behavior in primary social institutions and basic human relationships. All human relationships evolved a set of defined roles and mutual obligations; each participant should understand and conform to his/her proper role. Starting from the individual and family, people (by acting rightly) could reform and perfect the society" According to The Great Learning the meaning of life for Confucians (intellectuals) is to demonstrate illustrious virtue, to renovate the people and to rest in the highest excellence, which is called "The Three Guidelines". The self-actualization consists of the 8 steps: (1) to straighten out affairs; (2) to extend understanding; (3) to make intentions genuine; (4) to balance the mind; (5) to refine one's person; (6) to align one's household; (7) to order the state; (8) to set the world at peace, in which each first step is its next step's precondition. If one wants to realize these stages, one needs to have such a self-cultivation as:

The point where to rest is known, the object of pursuit is then determined; and, that being determined, a calm unperturbed-ness may be attained to. To that calmness, there will succeed in a tranquil repose. In that repose, there may be careful deliberation, and that deliberation will be followed by the attainment of the desired end.

Things have their root and their branches. Affairs have their end and their beginning. To know what is first and what is last will lead near to what is taught in The Great Learning .

The logic point of self-cultivation is Zhizhi (知止), which usually is explained as the place of rest being known, however in the model of 4TIS or Chinese cultural situation, it is more proper and reasonable that Zhizhi shall be explained as: (1)the beginning position of the meaning of life, and (2) the restriction of the social identity by 4TIS. It also can be explained as self-positioning and objective leading that object of pursuit is then determined. In this way, an individual knows who he is, where he comes from and where to go and in that way what life choices are more effective and meaningful. When an individual has a deep understanding of himself and his situation, he can keep his mind undisturbed, he is not easily dislocated and there is rarely a mismatch with duties and obligations. When an individual has calmness, the tranquil expose can be interpreted as devoting his mind to self-actualization. When all the aforementioned procedures are taken into account, the object of pursuit will be acquired. Through the individual's self-cultivation, the individual gradually acquires his social identity, and will be recognized by his community. Within this context, entering the process of his self-actualization step by step, from family to world.

Here, there is a Confucian assumption that each person has the desire to be perfect within their context. An individual just devotes himself to learning, whereas sages and men of virtue devote their lives to discovering the meaning of life. Therefore, the way to understand the meaning of life and self-actualization is teaching, not revolution.

5. A brief Conclusion.

Meaning and self-actualization are determined by cultures based on 4TIS. Meaning is a value based on individual choice, and self-actualization is the specific manifestation of the understanding of the meaning of life. In the understanding of systems of meaning, any change of the 4TIS may influence the viewpoint of an individual's understanding of the meaning of life. To pursuit happiness and freedom is dynamic in both the development of the individual and societies. Based on different theories and cultural situations, the ways to understand the meaning of life and the process of self-actualization are different. To develop an effective understanding of the meaning of life and to enable processes of self-actualization to flourish involves not only the endeavor of individuals, but also the improvement of the larger group. The subjectivity of an individual and his surrounding group determines his own unique way of developing.

As for Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the most important thing is to find out the common value of its members. On this foundation the mechanism to create an innovative system can be constructed. At the same time each member of ASEAN enables his own citizens to utilize and take advantage of their unique national and cultural means to develop themselves freely.

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