

The Consensus Basis of Nurturing Citizens' Charitable Spirit

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Abstract

A citizens' society needs and promotes the behavior of helping and sympathy for other people. The behavior of charity first is under the premise of respecting for citizens' freedom and equal status and follows the concept of *people-oriented*. Only if we take *citizens* as the center to nurture the spirit of charity (i.e., citizens' recognition and belief about the charity), it can meet needs of human society and realize the fundamental value of human beings. In the background of citizens having rational individual independence and freedom, we form a charity consensus that is a possible way to nurture the citizens' spirit of charity and solve conflict issues. When rationally examining unselfish and altruistic acts of charity, we find the charity's moral consensus rooted in the life way of people's helping each other in society solidarity. Through the charity, people seek win-win situation for individuals and the society under the background of society solidarity, namely, saving others as if saving oneself is the consensus basis of nurturing citizens' charitable spirit.

Key words: Citizens' charitable spirit; Consensus

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1. THE NECESSITY OF TAKING CITIZENS AS THE CENTER TO NURTURE THE SPIRIT OF CHARITY

The wise man Protagoras said, "man is the measure of all things" (Stumpf & Fieser, 2007/2009, p.26). Many scholars have thought that this slogan was the most representative slogan of advocating humanity in the early history of thought. It marked people to begin getting rid of shackles of the natural and man-made and establish the consideration from human beings' individual, independent status. So far, the history of human beings can be decomposed into the progress in natural science, the development of humanities and social science, and the significant political revolutions. And no matter the exploration of human body and the nature, the research on people's mental world and social life, or the struggle between classes is the history of individuals striving to be the *measure*. If we talk about the existence of the nature and society without taking the human beings' measure and meeting an *individual* needs which come from his natural property and social property, everything will be meaningless and become soundless finally. As *the measure of all things*, individuals are main bodies who have self-consciousness. Meeting individuals needs show that individuals are subjects who can make value judgments. Therefore, an individual's independence and autonomy is associated with people, things, and objects outside him. Perhaps, only few individuals may want to drift into an island and meet *Robinson* and *Friday*. All kinds of need of a person are met through relations between him and the nature, him and the society. A person is a body of these relations. So, in order to achieve purposes and the significance of people, how should we treat and explain relations between individuals and the community? (*Adjusting conduct standards of social relations* is a feature of a legal system. A legal system is general social conduct standards which have the content of rights and obligations. It

relies on the national force to adjust the social life. The legal relations are the most basic social relations, so understanding the legal relations is the foundation of understanding a person status and his social relations. The rule of law and the constitutional concept originated in the West, so a person's social relations including the political, legal relations and other related views which the Western jurisprudence proposed are factors we should think about.)

The concept of *citizen* has been used since the time of ancient Greece. Citizen characterizes the concept of natural person who has some **identity** or **qualification** and is closely related with the community. Simply say, the concept of citizen answers these questions in the public domain--*who am I* and *what should I do*. It explains an individual how to treat himself and the relations between him and others. In modern society, there is no class division among natural persons who have a same nationality, and no one can impose obligations to others. Although citizens enjoy rights that mainly are legal rights given by the constitution and the law, citizens also have moral rights and obligation to obey morals in the modern society. Every citizen is an independent individual and his personality should not be interfered. So, when we talk about nurturing the charitable spirit of citizens, an important issue is clear: Nurturing the spirit of charity is based on respect for freedom, equality and independence of citizens, rather than blindly advertise and emphasize charitable handouts and moral significance of sympathy, or pursue one kind of social atmosphere by standing on the highest point of any kind of social systems.

Charity itself is a way of human social activities to achieve the fundamental value of human beings. If nurturing the citizens' spirit of charity is imposing moral or legal force from top towards bottom, it will negate individual subjectivity and be more impossible to achieve the value pursued by human love and sympathy. Therefore, we should understand the choice of every citizen in sympathy for and helping others, respect the equal position of every citizen who accepts donations and relief, and support every citizen to independently undertake the social responsibility in charity activities. It is necessary that we take citizens as the center to nurture the spirit of charity (i.e., citizens' recognition and beliefs about the charity) from the point of view of freedom, equality, and independence of the human pursuit.

2. THE POSSIBILITY OF NURTURING THE CHARITY SPIRIT OF CITIZENS ON THE BASIS OF CONSENSUS

Consensus is a same view or compromise on a problem, and the view or compromise is formed by all of social strata and interest groups. The famous scholar John Rawls (1993/2000) believed that *overlapping consensus* concept provides a communication medium between

comprehensive doctrines of each individual and the *political justice* concept, and the political justice of a multi democratic society is a stable cornerstone (pp.61-170). In view of this, it is possible to find the recognition, communication, and cooperation between private fields of independence, freedom, equality of citizens and social public activities. *Diversity* is a true portrayal of a modern society. Because citizens' charitable behavior belongs to moral activities, can we form a moral consensus in this regard between different citizens?

Empiricists believe that there is no moral consensus among members of society, moral consensus only is a value strategy, and different economic, political, cultural groups have no way to form moral consensus in the world. Transcendental rationalist believe that there is generally effective, eternal moral consensus and moral consensus constitutes basis and standards of rationality and legitimacy for evaluating an ancient or modern society. In Karl Marx's view, moral consensus is an unity of absoluteness and relativity, class and universality, will and regularity. This is the objective understanding of moral consensus (Wang & Han, 2012, pp.36-39).

In the author's opinion, forming moral consensus is possible, and the key of forming moral consensus lies in whether opinions towards a moral issue can be viewed as being developing, having the limitation of social classes and following certain social rules. Therefore, moral consensus of charity can be formed if we analyze charity in a certain social environment with the vision of development, critical attitude towards classes and the view of historical materialism.

Consensus is the opposite of the conflict. The new liberalism believes that a way of resolving social conflicts and maintaining social stability is to reach consensus. This can also be explained based on the basic principle of Marxism--"mind over matter" (Heinrich and Friedrich, 1875-1883/1974, pp.891-892). When thoughts or ideas form consensus, people's interests and behavior can achieve harmony in social activities. The essence of nurturing citizens' charity spirit is to form stable cognitive charity and related positive behavior in a citizens' society. So, it can more extensively promote social charity fashion if nurturing citizens' recognition and belief about the charity on the basis of moral consensus. At the same time, it can be borne by more social groups. It has full possibility to nurture the citizen's spirit of charity on the basis of consensus.

3. THE FEASIBILITY TO NURTURE THE CITIZEN'S SPIRIT OF CHARITY ON THE BASIS OF CONSENSUS

In aid of social vulnerable groups, charity has been playing a very important role. Before the formation of the modern social security system, western countries were mainly through churches to guide charitable relief

of personal, local organizations for helping the poor, the old, the weak, widows, babies, and the people with problems of physiology or psychology. In China's Ming Dynasty, Buddhist charitable relief to vulnerable groups was also very fruitful. Because charity has high moral requirements and humanity itself is uncertain, social charitable behavior of strong groups is not stable under the premise of no national requirements. For the sake of conscience, charitable behavior is not a stable way to distribute social resources. It is more difficult to ensure the distribution of social resources to be fair based on the *share the wealth*. At the same time, the traditional concept of charity naturally has mercy attitude and it is likely to diminish and damage the dignity of some receivers. Permeated with a kind of mercy emotion of morals from top towards bottom, it may lead to the destruction of the principle of equality. For example, in the medieval time, the premise for the rich helping the poor was the poor obeying the rich, and the rich rescuing the poor was in order to get the religious sense of redemption. The poor get relief was to avoid fall down continually. This kind of charity showed different social positions between the poor and the rich. Especially, in the late Middle Ages, the poor got relief from shelters, but they lost personal freedom and dignity. They were regarded as harmful to the society and finally were abandoned. So, nurturing citizens' charity spirit need to find moral consensus which is based on relative, developing, and historic understanding of charity behavior.

Charity is the behavior that only appears in the human society. Free helping others is its main content. We can say that the charity is a kind of social moral behavior. Human beings are not made on production lines and do not have a unified standard. In human social life, there are inborn gender, physical strength, and mental differences between individuals. These inborn differences, differences caused by unpredictable environment and artificial factors make everybody to be unequal. In the industrial society, everyone's work and living ability also has differences. Especially, with the progress of industrialization, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to expand, poverty, disease and other risks threaten people's life, and new social vulnerable groups appear. All of these problems are very easy to cause inequality. The inequality that individuals can not fundamentally change and the contradiction between social overall development and distribution of development achievements are also social injustice. The pursuit of social justice is a main task of the social operation. The inequality that an individual can not fundamentally change and its negative effects need to be shared by the society. Charity is the redistribution of social resources and it relies on good moral characters of social members and their voluntary donations. Charity is set up on the basis of kindness and generosity. This kind of behavior of willing to help each other reflects sympathetic attitude from our heart. The core value of charity is the

altruistic value, but also contains self-interest in its actual social function, because the charitable behavior brings both social and personal interests.

So far, the human society has not found a way to completely solve the problem of poverty; of course, charity can not completely solve the problem either. Charity is distinct from functions of other social branches since charitable activities appear . . . The development of charity reflects the progress of social civilization and charity is a means to integrate social management. Charity can satisfy people's emotional need (Tao, 2008, pp.146-153).

There are three main principles of social distribution according to the explanation of economist LI Yining (March 30, 2004): The first is the competition, namely, an individual income is determined by his ability; the second is fair, namely, the redistribution through social security and social welfare; the third is morals, namely, the rich who volunteer to help the poor. These three distribution principles of social resources reflect three directions of an individual need in our society. Firstly, free living is a prior social living way of human beings. Free people can participate in competition for social resources and by virtue of their ability to obtain the corresponding income for life in the society. Secondly, equal life is a nature of social living way of human beings. Because of the influence of different congenital and acquired factors, it forms strong and weak individuals in competition and inequality. In order to balance the different interests of individuals, we use interests of the society as standards and redistribute social resources. Thirdly, charitable behavior is the social living way of morals. People are in the society and can only live in the society. The existence of a society has to have relations that put individuals together. Charity is the social relation which put individuals together. Everyone has the desire to pursue a happy life, but achieving a happy life needs helping each other in the common social life. Everyone has different abilities and needs. If people can exchange services and contribute their different abilities, the needs of everyone will possibly be satisfied in the common life. Therefore, people are associated in the pursuit of personal interests, public interests, and social interests. They are individuals who mutually assist and relieve each other. The social relations that each person has are social solidarity. Based on the fact of social solidarity, the social living way of individuals should be mutual aid. Free, equal, and charitable living is the social living way of social solidarity.

The existence of social solidarity fully confirms that the charity of selfless behavior can form a win-win situation for social development and individual development. One should save others as if saving himself. No one can guarantee that a stronger of today will not be a weaker tomorrow. The highest moral sentiment is self-discipline. Facing the recipients of relief, you should ask yourself: if you are a recipient of relief; can your charitable behavior satisfy you? On this basis, these

citizens' will of goodness should easily be converted to these citizens' recognition and belief about charity. In this way, moral self-discipline of citizens' charity and the fundamental consensus on nurturing citizens' spirit of charity can be achieved.

To sum up, a modern society of democracy and the rule of law needs and promotes the behavior of helping and sympathy for other people. The behavior of charity first is under the premise of respecting for citizens' freedom and equal status and follows the concept of people-oriented. Only if we take citizens as the center to nurture the spirit of charity (i.e., citizens' recognition and belief about the charity) can it meet needs of human society and realize the fundamental value of human beings. In the background of citizens having rational individual independence and freedom, we form a charity consensus that is a possible way to nurture the citizens' spirit of charity and solve conflict issues. When rationally examining unselfish and altruistic acts of charity, we find the charity's moral consensus rooted in the life way of people's helping each other in society solidarity. Through the charity, people seek win-win situation for individuals and the society under the background of society solidarity, namely, saving others as if saving oneself is the consensus basis of nurturing citizens' charitable spirit.

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