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Moral Perfectionism and the Three Faces of Extremism: A Look from the Perspective of Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

In this article, the author proposes that the moral perfectionism, which springs primarily from the psychological disturbance at the anal stage of an individual's early development, is the personality basis of the political extremism. Furthermore, taking the cultural influences into the consideration, the moral perfectionists developed in three different belief systems (animistic, monotheistic, or atheistically humanistic belief system) manifest three types of political extremism respectively. Animistic extremists tend to use magic and pre-logical thinking. And in history it was typical of them to practice human sacrifice as a way for upholding their belief systems. Monotheistic extremists require the highest purity of the beliefs and the fully submission to one single spirit. In medieval Europe, they asked for perfection of people's doing and advocate severe punishment, even death penalty, on imperfect deeds. Atheistically humanistic extremists, taking Khmer Rouge for example, with the purpose of achieving egalitarian justice, justify any costs including genocide.

Keywords

Extremism, Fundamentalism, Moral Perfectionism, Belief Systems, Psychosexual Stages, Psychoanalysis

1. Introduction

As the Cold War ended in early 1990s, for a time, it was widely believed that a long era of peace, cooperation, and prosperity was on the way. But the 9/11 attacks opened another "age of extremism" (Suskind, 2009). The long-term influence of 9/11 is not only the losses of the lives and the traumas of the survivors,

but the possible further spread of the radical ideologies and the frequent occurrence of the terrorist attacks. It's possible that an ethos of intolerance and violent actions hangs again over human societies if people do not make every effort to stop such trend.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "extremism" as "the holding of extreme political or religious views." The author of the present article basically agrees upon this definition. The author is also concerned about the ethical domain of extremism and believes it is the root of the other two domains—political and religious extremism.

Nowadays, the studies concerning extremism and its related phenomena such as political zealotry, fundamentalism, radicalism, and reactionism are accumulating rapidly in number (Littler & Lee, 2023). The majority of the studies on this topic have generally been carried out by the scholars specializing in political science and religious studies (e.g. Backes, 2010; Berger, 2018; Hunsberger, 1995; Ruthven, 2005; Stern & Berger, 2015; Kimball, 2002). Apart from a few studies conducted by psychologists such as Gruen (2003), Druckman (2001), Durrheim (1998), and Kobrin (2016), the psychological connotations of extremism still remain to be explored adequately. The author of the present article proposes that, perfectionism, as a trait of personality (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost et al., 1990) and in its extreme form as a typical diagnostic feature of obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD) (APA, 2013), are closely associated with political/religious extremism. In particular, the perfectionism which is morality-oriented is a predictor of extremism.

Traditionally in clinical psychology, perfectionism is associated with behaviors and feelings such as being unable to complete a project because of overly strict standards for the task performance (APA, 2000), concerning over mistakes (Frost et al., 1990), fearing of failures (Zi, 2007), and feeling anxious when one's tasks do not proceed according to plans, orders, and imaginations (Zi, 2007; Zi & Ma, 2010). Perfectionism which is morality-oriented, instead of task performance-oriented, has not attracted much scholastic interests after the studies on perfectionism boomed in the 1980s and afterwards. However, the recent version of the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders compiled by the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-5) still made a progress by providing a concept of "rigid perfectionism" which refers not only to the perfectionism regarding task-performance, but to the difficulty in changing viewpoints (APA, 2013: p. 768).

Oakeshott (1996), as a philosopher and theorist in politics, criticized "the politics of faith" which he also termed as "politics of perfection." He suggested that humans have a tendency of directing the progress toward perfection, which leads to extremism. Oakeshott's such idea is inspiring but also arguable because even in a history period when extremism was prevalent, only a small proportion of people manifested extremist thoughts and even smaller proportion of people took radical actions. Striving for perfection might be the omnipresent human nature, but some individuals are more perfectionistic than others. These people, under some conditions, might be more likely to become the active advocates to achieve

perfection in political ideology. Some studies suggest the possibility of the association. For instance, Durrheim's (1998) empirical study revealed that, being unable to tolerate ambiguity, which is one of the motivational causes that impel individuals to strive for perfectionism, is positively correlated with attitudinal conservatism and negatively correlated with openness. Accordingly, being unable to tolerate ambiguity in moral issues would motivate some people to take to political actions to achieve the moral perfectionism. The author proposed that, when perfectionism is directed toward the belief sphere, which is the major source of morality, an individual tends to require purity and absoluteness, which becomes the psychological dynamics for extremism.

Extremism has been increasingly perplexing the contemporary world, which brings serious threats to the security and the wellbeing of mankind. The author of the present article suggests that, in addition to the studies carried out from the viewpoints of political science and religious studies, extremism should also be examined from the perspective of psychoanalysis.

2. From Animistic to Atheistically Humanistic: The Three Faces of Extremism

The author argues that human belief systems have undergone two major transformations in general. The first transformation is from animism to monotheism. The second transformation is from monotheism to atheistic humanism. Corresponding to these three stages of human belief systems, namely animistic system, monotheistic system, and the atheistically humanistic system, there exist three types of extremisms.

People in the animism tradition tend to understand the world by adopting pre-logical thinking and explain human lives according to mystical and supernatural mechanisms (Levy-Bruhl, 1910, 1931). The lives in this tradition are fraught with rituals, totems, and taboos (Levi-Strauss, 1966). Animism has been the starting point of the belief systems of all human beings (Tylor, 1871). And extremists within this type of belief system also resort to magic and pre-logical thinking to achieve the goal of developing and protecting animistic systems. Their religious and political zealotry surges especially when those systems face challenges. The most typical practice for that purpose might be the human sacrifice. In the practice of human sacrifices, people of disadvantaged groups are chosen to offer their lives for the purpose of pleasing the Gods and consolidating the position of the ruling classes.

Monotheistic cultures require individuals to follow the will of one single spiritual existence (Smith, 2001; Freud, 1939/1955). In contrast to people in animistic cultures, individuals in monotheistic cultures less frequently explain the mechanism of their lives according to magics. Monotheistic belief systems stress the exclusiveness and the uniqueness of themselves. Likewise, extremisms developed from monotheistic tradition stress the purity of beliefs and the fully submission to one single spirit. Monotheistic extremisms ask for perfection of an individual's doing and advocate severe punishment on imperfect deeds, even death pe-

nalty. Medieval monotheistic belief systems were infected by such extremism to a great extent.

Humanism generated from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment in Europe. After several centuries' development, humanism has enriched its connotation with values such as human rights, freedom, equality, and fraternity. Humanism has also been seen as a prerequisite and catalyst for modern sciences. Even though humanism has strongly promoted the development of the human society, it has also been immune from perfectionistic thoughts and political extremism. One of the typical examples is the ultra-left trend of thought in the French Revolution and some communist revolutions such as Khmer Rouge movement. Perfectionistic humanism denies the individual differences. For this purpose, extremists with such thoughts do not have misgivings about depriving any person of his freedom, property, and even dignity, in their effort to achieve an egalitarian justice.

3. Challenges of the Belief Systems and Its Related Perfectionism and Extremism

Although animism, monotheism, and humanism have been the three successively emerged belief systems in human history, the contemporary world is actually still an arena in which three types of systems coexist and compete with each other. Apart from the typical monotheism such as Judaism, Catholicism, and Islamism which encompass more than half of the earth population, ancient animistic beliefs such as Hinduism and Buddhism and modern atheistic humanism such as socialism and communism are the spiritual homes for other billions of humans. Even until the present time, Shamanism is still a strong sub-culture in the North-east Asia (Se, 1998; Qiu, 2018). According to the author's personal psychotherapeutic practices, quite a few clients with mental disorders from this geographic region seek psychiatric treatment and exorcism simultaneously and feel inner conflicts when taking the scientific and Shamanistic epistemology and etiology at the same time.

Albeit humans live on one single earth, the world in our eyes can be critically different. Nowadays, in some nations such as China and the United States, the conflicts among different belief systems have becoming increasingly acute and the conflicts have been challenging the stability of the societies. For example, Falungong, a religious group which holds a worldview mainly shamanistic and animistic, clashed with the mainstream socialistic belief system which is supported and strengthened by the regime, which led to a series of traumatic events. In the United State of America, Christianity and left-wing socialistic ideology are in confliction with each other with unprecedented tension.

People in the present world do not show enough tolerance toward the belief systems of the other traditions. Although the general level of education of mankind has been raised continually to a higher height, the disputes in belief spheres still lead to extreme thoughts and radical actions. The multiculturalism is facing numerous serious tests.

The author proposes that, when one type of belief system is challenged by another system, for instance, an animistic system is challenged by a monotheistic system, or a monotheistic system is confronted by another monotheistic system, or a monotheistic system and an atheistic system are challenged by each other, individuals in one system are prone to stick to their own belief and show fundamentalism and extremism. This phenomenon could be coined as "stress and crisis triggered extremism". The individuals' such reaction might due to the crisis of identification triggered by the challenge from other belief systems. Even more, given that the identification to a belief system often meets the narcissistic grandiose self needs of the people who are collected and grouped by that system (Cichocka, de Zavala, Marchlewska, & Olechowski, 2015), the challenges to their belief system would cause "narcissistic rage" (Kohut, 1972) and activate resolute endeavor to protect their belief against the competing systems.

But we could easily see that among the individuals in the belief systems which are challenged by other systems, some of them are more extreme than other people in protecting and advocating their original systems. The author maintains that the individual differences should be firstly analyzed from their personal experiences and personality traits. Perfectionism, as a personality trait which manifest itself as rigid in changing viewpoints, probably partly explains why some individuals think and behave more radically when facing the challenges from other ideologies.

Some studies have revealed that their perfectionism becomes more significant when perfectionistic individuals are put into personal stressful situations such as academic competitions (Zi, 2012). It is reasonable to infer that if perfectionism is directed toward belief issues, the stressful challenges stir some perfectionists to turn to perfectionistic thinking in terms of beliefs. This kind of thinking constitutes the cognitive and motivational core of extremism.

In addition to the possible association between perfectionism and extremism at the individual level, when the group psychology is taken into consideration, perfectionism and extremism might also correlate. Opinions, notions, and moralities become especially appealing and convincing when they are expressed with perfectionistic modes. The statements such as "no tiny bit of exploitation is allowed in this world" "give me liberty or give me death" "delay of justice is injustice," and "one must be thorough in exterminating an evil" incite emotions, bypass rational reflections, and win followers and advocates rapidly. Even though most individuals are not perfectionists and obsessionals, such propositions, competing with other similar ones but not so perfectionistic and extreme, tend to enchant more listeners, at least in a majority period of time in the history.

Furthermore, the human psychology has the seeds for all three belief systems. Nobody could exclusively claim that he himself is purely a believer of one single system. But a system might be temporarily dominant in one's mind whereas others are latent. Some individuals hold on to one system and have low tolerance to the appearance of the oppressed intrapsychic heresy. Others accept the coex-

istence of the two or three kinds of beliefs on the conscious level. When a person could not tolerate the existence of different modes of thinking in his own mind, he would unsurprisingly show low tolerance to others who think differently.

In addition, looking back to human history, belief systems of the same level, such as Christianity and Islamism, which are both monotheistic ideologies, and the different sects of socialism, which derive from the same movement of humanism which could be traced back to Renaissance and The Enlightenment, have had the fiercest internal confrontations.

4. The Possibility of Anal Stage Fixation and Extremism: Understanding the Individual Differences of Extremism

Classical psychoanalysis holds that the three early psychosexual stages are especially crucial for the development of personality. The anal stage is believed to be the pivotal period in which perfectionism and other traits of obsessive-compulsive personality are in their peaks of the development. Freud proposed that, if parents are extremely strict, their children would develop anal-retentive personality features such as perfectionism, rigidity, being stringent and obsessive, and having the extreme need for orderliness and cleanness. Kohut (1984) argued that if an individual developed anal features to an extreme extent, this person might not only meet some difficulties at the anal stage, but also had something wrong with the development in the earlier stage, namely oral stage. An individual who had not acquired enough sense of security and trust at the oral stage would feel more stressful when he deals the issues in the anal stage. For example, an individual who had acquired the sense of security at the oral stage also feel anxious when things are not in order, not under control, or imperfect, but this "imperfection anxiety" generally does not arouse deeper anxiety that is associated with basic security related to the abandonment and the death.

Therefore, when a psychoanalyst considers the developmental issue of certain stage, he needs to take the issues in the previous developmental stages into consideration. The unresolved issues at the previous stages often worsen the issues of the present stage. Kohut (1984) termed this phenomenon as "telescoping." In this vein, we can also infer that if a person meets some difficulty at the present stage, he probably withdraws and stays at the previous stage to avoid unbearable pressures he has to deal with.

For an individual with salient anal features who lives in an animistic culture, his anal dynamics probably impel him to strive for the perfection of rituals, customs, totems, and taboos. For example, when placing Feng Shui (Chinese Geomancy), the masters inform people who are designing their houses that the directions of the doors, the locations and the sizes of the bedrooms, even the types and heights of the trees in the courtyards should be chosen according to mystical principles, and the houses which are not designed and built according to the principles of Feng Shui would bring adversities to the owners.

For the monotheistic cultures, which set explicit and unified commandments for people, a person with anal features probably becomes an enthusiastic guarder

of the mainstream doctrines. For example, some medieval religious leaders with great influences proposed extremely strict standards and detailed requirements for the followers. Gradually, billions of people had to follow some uniform, simplified, and unreasonable regulations in not only spiritual fields, but also daily lives such as what foods are allowed to eat and how a scarf should wear. And these regulations with strong anal disposition were considered the guarantees of the piety.

In general, the monotheistic belief systems which were dominant in medieval times show remarkable anal features such as rigidity, strictness, and low tolerance to transgressions. The medieval monotheistic belief systems as an overarching cultural background with anal tune interacted with the religious leaders of anal features and the two levels of entities reinforced each other.

The author suggests that, the Protestant Reformation during the 15th and 16th century diminished the anal character of Christianity, and gave some room for the development of oedipal features. Protestant belief system transformed from an authoritarian system into a humanistic belief system. At the same time, because of the booming of scientific exploration, atheistic humanistic belief systems also came into being. Socialism and communism are the two most representative ones.

When it comes to a society where atheistic humanistic ideology prevails, an obsessional humanistic individual tends to be a staunch advocate of perfect equality and/or absolute freedom. Since that atheistic humanistic belief systems emerged along with the history of colonialism and industrialization. Socialism and communism have taken the task of criticizing the negative influence caused by imperialism and capitalism. (The author also views postmodernism and multiculturalism as belonging to the tradition of atheistic humanism.) The atheistic humanism has not avoided the infection of perfectionism and extremism. Probably one of the most notorious examples of this kind of extremism is the Khmer Rouge, a movement in the name of communism which led to the death of around a quarter of the Cambodian population (Kimball, 2002).

It's worth to note that the nations and the regions where atheistic humanism had been used as excuses for the annihilations and the purges were generally not be the industrialized areas where the atheistic humanism originated. Cambodia was one of these instances. As an agricultural nation where Buddhism was the dominant belief system, in 1970s, Khmer Rouge mutated communism into an extreme version. Despite the idealistic endeavors for absolute equality, what the regime of Khmer Rouge really achieved was by no means a humanistic new society which had anything to do with equality or other humanistic goals. The author supposes that, the anal features of East Asia and Southeast Asia Buddhism constituted a spiritual soil for transplanting communism and turning it to extreme forms. But the author does not consider Buddhism as a religion originally anal. In fact, the salient anal characteristic of Buddhism came from the localization process when it was spread to East Asia and Southeast Asia at the period

contemporaneous to western medieval times.

5. Discussion

The present article is a preliminary reflection and analysis on the relationship between perfectionism and extremism. The author proposed that extremism arises from the anal features, especially the moral perfectionism of the anal stage. And the three major belief systems, animistic, monotheistic, and atheistically humanistic, which flourished successively in human history and are still coexisting in contemporary world, are all susceptible to extremism and radicalization. If an individual whose personality is fixed at the anal stage of mental development and his perfectionism is directed to the ethical issues, he might become an enthusiastic advocate of certain belief system, especially when such system undergoes challenges.

The author believes that the discoveries in this field would contribute to the reformation of education and the promotion of political tolerance. Human beings are always diverse in ideology. Multiculturalism has been advocated by generations of scholars and practitioners. However, the past decades have seen an increasing prevalence of tensions, intolerances, and uncompromising attitudes among groups of people with different belief systems. The author is especially concerned about the signs of perfectionism in political, ethical, and religious domains within multiple cultures. It is disturbing to find that although modern science and technology have created a better material basis, they are not able to simultaneously promote the critical thinking and the openness of minds. The scholars with psychoanalytical background shall not be absent in combating the extremisms and radicalisms of all kinds since psychoanalysis has always been one of the professions which give great concern for what is happening in the social sphere.

6. Future Directions

The author deems that the issues analyzed in the present article need further scrutiny and this domain might become fruitful for scholastic investigations. The mixed methods should be adopted to test the conclusions and hypotheses proposed in the present study. Clinical experiences, empirical evidence, historical documents, and anthropological observations should be combined to promote the further understanding of extremism.

Although the author emphasizes the importance of the anal stage features—especially moral perfectionism—in the formation of extremism, it is quite possible that individual developmental disturbances at other psychosexual stages also contribute to the extreme thoughts and deeds. For instance, a disturbed psyche at the oedipal stage—the stage next to the anal stage—might stir and cage the self with archaic omnipotence, which, interacts with moral perfectionism, forms a charismatic and dynamic character that is often the typical image of some leaders in a series of extremist movements.

Besides, the mechanism of reverse identification (Soares & Soares, 1967), which manifests itself at the beginning of the genital stage, could explain the ideological confrontations between two consecutive generations and the phenomenon that a new generation of individuals tends to choose the opposite of what the previous generation believes in ideology and develop those values to extreme extent.

Fund

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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