

FREEDOM: THE MORAL FOUNDATION



PAUL JOHNSON



In November 1975, Ross McWhirter was murdered by an IRA bomb.

The 1981 the Ross McWhirter Memorial Address was delivered in the Skinners' Hall, City of London, by Paul Johnson. The text of this address was reproduced in the June 1981 issue of *The Free Nation*, the journal of the Freedom Association, in the running of which Ross McWhirter had played a prominent part.

We are here tonight to honour the memory of a man who gave his life for freedom. To me this is not only a moving, it is also a profoundly comforting thought: that there are among us, even in this leaden age of ours, those in whom the flame of freedom burns so brightly that even the final sacrifice seems worthwhile to keep it alight. We can, I think, take comfort in the honoured dead.

THE CITIES OF THE DEAD

I remember some years ago, while walking in north-west France, I came across, looking unexpectedly through the morning mist, the huge and majestic cenotaph which Sir Edwin Lutyens designed for the battlefield of the Somme. It was like a vision. And, as the mist cleared, one could see unfold the endless rows of white crosses stretching out to the horizon.

Here, a hundred thousand British soldiers had perished, all of them volunteers, all of them in some degree driven to serve by a sense of idealism. Whatever the historians may say, they believed they were fighting for freedom, and in the event they died for it. And not in vain, for I defy anyone who visits one of the great war cemeteries to leave without drawing comfort and moral sustenance from the experience. As Byron puts it:

Freedom hallows with her tread
The silent cities of the dead.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



And such cities of the dead are not wholly silent. They bear witness - as our dead friend bears witness - to the unbroken continuity of human idealism, stretching back over the graves of the dead, into the very distant past - into, indeed, the millennium before Christ.

John Stuart Mill, in reviewing Grote's *History of Greece*, pointed out that the Battle of Marathon was, for the English, a more important battle than the Battle of Hastings. It is true; for those who love freedom, the exploration of the past is a constant stimulus and comfort. History is an enormous reservoir of moral capital, on which we can draw copiously.

THE MORAL VIRTUE OF FREEDOM

It is a significant fact that, today, Mr Gladstone has again become a relevant and exemplary figure. With his love of economy, his hatred of big government, his devotion to economic and political freedom, he is for our times a more stimulating and impressive mentor than Mr Disraeli. And Gladstone himself found the source of his action in the honoured dead of the past. During the parliamentary recess of 1867, after the passing of the Second Reform Bill, he made a study of Homer in order to discern its modern relevance.

What did he find in Homer? As fine a set of public principles as are to be obtained anywhere. I quote his words:

The power of opinion and persuasion, as opposed to force. The sense of responsibility in governing men. The hatred, not only of tyranny, but of all unlimited power. The love and the habit of reconciliation and harmony between the spirit of freedom, on the one hand, and the spirit of order and reverence on the other. And a practical belief in rights as relative, and in duty as reciprocal.

In the ninth century BC, Homer was able to isolate, to identify and to recommend these great public virtues of a free society. Today, three thousand years later, they are still not only relevant, but absolutely central, worth fighting and dying for. There is a point to consider on the subject of freedom, which I think perhaps enlightened men in Homer's age might have grasped more readily than we do today.

The point is this. All of us here accept the *political* virtues of freedom. And all of us, I think, can recognise the *economic* virtues of freedom. But to my mind, the salient, the quintessential, the outstanding quality of freedom is its *moral* virtue. Freedom is a political and an economic necessity. But it is above all a moral necessity.

Let me describe to you freedom's triad - the great tripod of qualities upon which freedom as a moral force rests. The first is sacrifice. There can be all kinds of sacrifices: sacrifices of leisure, and of time and energy; sacrifices of desire, inclination and will; and sacrifice of health, and limb, even of life. But the one thing they all have in common is the voluntary principle.

There can be no sacrifice in a compulsory society, where the demands of the state are all-embracing and universal, and enforced by law and police and power. There is no sacrifice in belonging to the closed shop. No sacrifice in a society where the state authority takes it upon itself to lay down in exhaustive detail the obligations of all its citizens, and to enforce them with relentless ferocity.

It is said, by those who advocate compulsory morality, that a free society is a licence for egoism and a formula for mass selfishness. So it may be, perhaps. But is also, and more surely, an open arena, in which the unselfish drive in man can manifest itself. It is an invitation to nobility, an opportunity for service, a warrant for generosity and heroism beyond the call of duty. There is no such thing as statutory charity, or sacrifice by Act of Parliament. No one can be legislated into sanctity. A compulsory society may breed technocrats and it certainly breeds bureaucrats. It does not breed saints or heroes.

RISK

Now the second great moral feature of freedom is related to the opportunity for sacrifice. It is the propensity to take risks. Man is often defined as a tool-making animal. I think it is more accurate

to call him a risk-taking animal. Our bodies are earthbound but our spirits soar. It is our yearning and determination to reach beyond the point which is safe that distinguishes us from the brute creation. And it is the glory of man that he takes risks not only or principally on his own behalf but on behalf of humanity.

The history of human progress is the history of risks, risks daringly undertaken and successfully survived. In the great human capital of skill and technology and knowledge which we collectively inherit, risk is the essential element which went into its accumulation. Our prosperity today was paid for by the risks taken by our forebears. And we repay our debt to the species by taking risks from which our progeny will benefit.

It is characteristic of the compulsory society that it seeks to eliminate risks, that it denies the right of individuals to take risks, that it seeks to denigrate risk and confuses risk with gambling. That is the impulse, for instance, which drives the ominous international campaign against the industrial use of nuclear energy. The attempt to create the no-risk, safety-first society, a society cocooned in an infinitude of minute safety rules and regulations, is the biggest threat facing the Western economies today.

In the United States, under pressure from the huge anti-risk lobby, American enterprise has been buried beneath an avalanche of statutory regulations - and enormous federal regulatory agencies to enforce them - which together have become the biggest single cause of its poor performance and, in particular, of its stagnant productivity. The regulatory agency is now the American equivalent of the British trade union - an ever-growing burden which private enterprise must carry. And it is possible to observe the same process beginning here.

But of course the refusal to take risks is, for human societies, the greatest risk of all. And, at a moral level, the urge to take risks is the emblem of the divinity of man - the spirit of Icarus, which soars over our grosser appetites. I agree with Francis Bacon when he remarks: "They that deny God destroy man's nobility; for certainly man is of kin to the beasts by his body; and if he be not kin to God by his spirit, then he is a base and ignoble creature."

Well said; risk-taking springs from our elemental urge to do better, to excel and to realise the higher spirit within us. That is what gives risk its moral quality, and makes it such an ennobling element of a free society. The willingness to take risks is an essential element in all political progress; it is fundamental to economic expansion; and, not least, it is the foundation of human self-respect and moral improvement. Risk is the atmosphere in which freedom lives and breathes.

CONSCIENCE

The third great moral attribute of freedom is the individual conscience. Conscience is the self-correcting mechanism of human progress, the admonitory organ within us, which goes to the very core of our being, which spurs our sense of sacrifice and gives our urge towards risk its moral content. Freedom is not an end in itself; it is a means to a higher end.

Lord Acton, who spent his entire life collecting materials for a history of liberty, observed, rightly in my view: "Liberty is of conscience. A man must live by the light of doing what we ought." A free society, he said, "is ultimately founded on the idea of conscience. A man must live by the light within and prefer God's voice to man."

We need not share Acton's religious faith to accept the truth of this proposition. There is a light within all of us which must be allowed to shine on our lives. We cannot opt out of moral decisions by putting a collective conscience in charge of our behaviour. Indeed, a collective conscience is a contradiction in terms. A conscience is individual, or it is nothing. I cannot delegate my conscience to a Member of Parliament, or a minister of government, let alone to a bureaucrat whom I do not even help to elect.

Perhaps one of the most morally debilitating features of our times is the willingness of so many among us to say: "The poor are no concern of mine - that is the business of the Ministry of Social Security. The sick are not my affair - that is for the Ministry of

Health. Nor for me to look after the homeless - we have a Ministry of Housing for that." This is the voice of moral abdication, the voice of Scrooge: "What, are there no prisons? Are there no work-houses? Are not the Treadmill and the Poor Law in full vigour?" he asked, when the charitable gentlemen called.

The central moral weakness of the compulsory society is that it turns charity into a nationalised industry, transforms the human impulse into a statutory benefit, and denies the individual the right to be generous in the light of his conscience. Conscience itself is indestructible, but without freedom to exercise it, atrophy sets in: a man is morally diminished when the state takes over 'the still, small voice' of conscience, and broadcasts it over the tannoy.

Conscience is our personal, inalienable possession: it is a birthright and an heirloom, entailed on us as individuals for the span of our lives. We cannot mortgage it to a political party or surrender it to an ideology or give it to a politician to hawk around the House of Commons.

There is no such thing as a power of attorney over a man's conscience. We are answerable as individuals; there can be no collective excuses. That is the ultimate moral merit of the free society and the voluntary principle: it recognises the individual responsibility of man and gives him liberty to accept or reject it. The choice is ours alone: we cannot take refuge behind majority opinion.

Margaret Thatcher once said to me: "Why have we allowed the Socialists to claim morality on their side? Why do we say so little about the morality of freedom?" I agree with her. The most serious mistake made by those of us who honour individual freedom has been to allow the debate to be conducted on the field of efficiency and expediency alone. That is not good enough. I repeat: freedom *is* a moral issue. It is *above all* a moral issue.

The real evil of class politics, the fundamental objection to political determinism, is that they destroy the individuality of men as unique creatures, each invested with freedom of will. The class war - and the compulsory society to which it inevitably leads - breeds hatred and poisons society at its very roots. But, still more reprehensibly, it denies to you and me our status as human beings, whose desires and hopes and ideals transcend the class to which we belong or the economic category into which we are thrust by chance. It denies us this unique status, and insists that we are mere flotsam, ephemeral rubbish drifting impotently on the tides of historical necessity.

I reject these determinist doctrines as inherently immoral and grossly insulting. They degrade mankind. We are not lemmings. We are not swine of Gadara. Weak we may be, but the individual conscience gives us a freehold over our moral destiny which no party or state or regime can take away from us. That conscience is the ultimate credential of our humanity. I do not say that conscience is an easy possession. On the contrary, free will is necessarily a burden. The freedom to choose is, in one sense, a continuous burden, and a burden we must carry, in the last resort, alone.

THE VIRTUOUS DEAD

That is why we need the help and inspiration of examples. We must have heroes, to comfort us in our solitude. And so we commemorate noble spirits who have gone before us, we commemorate them in tombs and monuments, in prose and verse, and on occasions like this, when we meet to remember a man whose life and sacrifice we admire, and whose example we strive to follow. A great gulf separates the living and the dead. But a man who dies well, in whose death we can discern moral purpose, throws, as it were, a slender bridge across that gulf. In departing he illuminates the scene, disperses the darkness, and gives us confidence and courage to follow.

There is, then a kind of compact between the virtuous dead and the living who still aspire. In this case it was - is - a compact to hold on to the freedoms we still possess, and to seek to enlarge them. The compact goes back, generation after generation, deep into antiquity. Let us honour that compact in and by our lives, as he did. And let us honour it in such a way that those who come after us will wish to honour it too.