

Edward R. Norman

Freedom in an Age of Selfishness

A little over twenty years ago, when I was a Tutor of Jesus College, charged with the moral welfare of undergraduates, I attended a small meeting of Cambridge tutors to discuss student drug-taking—then a problem in the Universities. We were addressed by a senior member of the police drug-squad. He was a man of rough virtue who expressed himself, as I thought, roughly. His advice was about the recognition of potential drug-takers: look out, he said, for the sort of boy “who isn’t outside playing football with his mates, like real boys should, but who sits in his room reading poetry.” The word “poetry” was articulated with noticeable scorn.

At the time I still retained a residual respect—now lost—for the notion that intellectual cultivation and moral goodness were somehow related, and I can remember being faintly outraged. Today, I can see the point of his simple distinction. In the intervening years the idea that life is all about personal fulfillment rather than personal commitment to communal advantage has grown considerably.

We are doubtless all responsible for this; but educationalists have a particular share in the responsibility. For the tendencies I am about to describe begin in the classroom: the idea that life owes us personal

fulfillment; that it is all about the internal development of our sensibilities and our material satisfaction; that we have a wide range of “rights” so sacred that we are justified in developing or enjoying them without regard to their effect on others; that self-expression is more important than self-control. Of all the shifts of emphasis within the world of educational values in the last two decades this will prove to be, in my judgment, the most far-reaching and, for man, the most devastating.

Like all changes, it is ushered in by its exponents’ projection of a model of the sort of attitudes they wish to displace. They represent the old world as full of brutal insensitivity to the integrity of individuals—in which children were educated into unquestioning subservience to class superiors, to imperial ideology, to flint-faced capitalism, to religion and culture as instruments of social control, and so forth. The facets of this historical caricature are easily discernible in television plays about Victorian England, or in the kind of textbooks used in most of the classrooms in the land. Like all

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caricatures, furthermore, it has to contain enough truth to be convincing—and so it does. But it is a slander of the dead, as contemporary social polemicism usually is, for it ignores the humanity in their motives, their involuntary indebtedness to past ideals and common assumptions, and, above all, their pursuit, however imperfectly, of higher purposes for human existence than the fulfillment of personal inclination.

We have, in fact, entered a new age of selfishness. That is another, if less adorned, way of expressing the goal of “personal fulfillment.” Because the content of the “fulfillment” is rendered in terms of cultural interests or supposed moral awareness, its claimants get away with a scheme of priorities which, if described differently, would appear less attractive: the dissolving of both social and “higher” responsibilities in the seemingly bottomless pool of personal desires. It is an almost exact reversal of the thought which has until recently characterized Western culture: that was always about the limitations of personal action and described the ways in which the individual, while retaining his integrity, surrendered large areas of personal choice in order to attain a greater benefit—the good of others, or the acquisition of spiritual blessedness. Now the purpose of existence has been internalized. The heroes of contemporary Western culture are no longer those of determined good character: they are those who are described as “personalities.” It is a telling change. The loyalty we owe to ourselves seems more important than the loyalty we owe to ideals and people outside ourselves. There are many evidences of the phenomenon.

The decline of religion is involved. It is a decline to be attributed, in some measure, to its own practitioners. By dissolving the authority of the Scriptures, and in effect destroying the title deeds of the Church by

randomizing the acceptability of ecclesiastical tradition, the theologians have reduced faith to a matter of internal disposition and personal opinion. Believers are no longer those who sacrifice their human doubts or intellectual comforts in order to obey a mystery beyond normal comprehension; who surrender their wills to the higher purposes of a spiritual allegiance; who respect the judgment of the centuries. They are, on the contrary, those who now pick and choose among the rubble left by the theologians who have ransacked the temple. They are, as they suppose, “adult” in their faith, making no sacrifice of will or mind, but each constructs a private-enterprise “religion” to suit his personal inclinations and moral fancies. It is, indeed, one of the few areas in which private enterprise has managed to flourish in these days.

In the world of politics and public affairs, also, the appeal is now to the material advantage of the individual. Even nationalism—that flawed communal loyalty—has drained out of Western societies. There was, without doubt, much that was undesirable in nationalism; it was at times, in fact, a collective expression of exactly the appeal to individual as against general interests and loyalties of the sort I am describing. But behold the modern replacement. We see how the emphasis has shifted in the reasons public men are prepared to offer for major political decisions in the life of our Western states. Nations and political systems are judged not by the ideals of human association to which they claimed allegiance, but by consideration of their record as supplying the material demands of their citizens. It is more important, they say in effect, for governments to be classified according to their willingness to raise living standards than according to the kind of non-material values they stand for.

The issues are complicated. We are easily misled into supposing that ours are societ-

ies attuned to higher ideals because of the prevalence of talk about Human Rights. Surely here is evidence of non-material, "higher" purposes in political discourse? But in reality the *content* of Human Rights talk, when actually applied in particular societies, is all about the material claims of the individual: that is precisely why its advocates believe it has a universal application. Human Rights are employed to condemn countries where the people are said to be too poorly housed, inadequately fed, where the educational facilities are scarce, or the terms of livelihood selective. These are all areas in which change is doubtless necessary. My observation is simply that the emphasis in such demands is on the *material* advantage of the citizen, on his personal claims.

Modern politicians speak to the voters about the personal advantages to be achieved under their rule. They do not speak the language of sacrifice for some greater good, except in the short-term sense of possible economic hardship resulting from a short-fall in productivity. It is a depressing picture for those who suppose that human life was intended to be about more elevated things. For us, the conflict of values is subordinated to political squabbles about the level of prescription charges.

Nowhere is the effect of the trend I have been trying to describe so productive of harm than in personal relationships. Every person is now induced to suppose that his opinion about his own interests is sover-

eign, that life owes him not only personal fulfillment but a whole catalogue of detailed expectations without which there is injustice. Education raises expectations too high and too soon: each child is taught to think that his own satisfaction is his birth-right, that life owes him happiness, good health, uncomplicated family and personal relationships, an enjoyment of whatever pleasures appear to his mind or senses. You do not need to look much further than this to recognize the cause of the contemporary

instability of marriage. The increased divorce rate is not to be looked for in social pressures, as so many, including senior Churchmen, now contend. The cause is personal and moral. With a claim to complete personal gratification, and with a set of expectations about what life should hold out, it is hardly surprising that the realities are a disappointment, and that people find it difficult to co-exist at

close quarters, in relationships where a high level of personal sacrifice is essential to success.

In wider dimensions of human experience, too, the present modes of thought produce great dissatisfaction. Having reduced the political dimension of man to the mere pleasing of material wants, the politicians now find themselves incapable of delivering even those goods. The result is that nasty beast: frustrated hope. The electorate had been led to expect so much of political action. They discover that most of the important problems of human life are not



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amenable to political solution. Thus a happy family life, or release from sorrow, freedom from illness, spiritual consciousness, stable professional relationships, and so on—the stuff of daily living, in fact—are beyond the reach of the political. An impossibly high set of expectations in these areas, as now exists, together with disappointment that ruling political groups seem incapable of helping, lays up real trouble for the future of society. The claim to “personal fulfillment” is creating a new barbarism, a war of all against all.

What I am suggesting amounts to one thing: that in our Western societies people are losing a sense of any standards outside of themselves, of a higher note in human life. They lack a daily acquaintance with transcendence, of the sort once inseparable, in traditional societies, from even the most humble man’s perception. Sometimes that perception was furnished by patriotism, sometimes by loyalty to the institutions in which he was integrated, sometimes—most times—by religion. The erosion of religious sanction is the most noticeable of these today. It is not just a matter of defection from belief in God—the decay there is not quite so advanced as is conventionally supposed, particularly by intellectual analysts whose own abandonment of religious faith seemed so convincing that they cannot imagine how anyone else can possibly retain it.

Religious belief remains quite widespread in our society, though usually in exceedingly ignorant forms. The difficulty with religion as an external sanction for people’s lives lies elsewhere: it lies, once again, with the Churchmen themselves. It is they who have re-interpreted God in such a benign and humanist fashion that all His powers of wrath have been stripped away. Once the fear of judgment was a very real daily sanction which recalled men to purposes other than the satisfaction of their own desires. As

now understood by the bishops, God appears rather like the chairperson of one of those “Quangos” which are always calling upon the government to spend more money to abolish evil. As a force to terrorize the weakness of men into altruism the humanist God is a trifle inadequate.

The sanction of national sentiment, too, is rather weak among us. There is a strong current of opinion which supposes it is more satisfactory to obey the dictates of one’s own inclinations—which are always represented, of course, as moral truth—than national advantage. The flat national morale of the Western nations stands in sharp contrast to the soaring nationalism of Eastern Europe and the emergent countries of the developing world. As for the external sanctions once provided by loyalty to institutions, they, too, have long since gone, buried with the *gottterdammerung* of satire and class guilt that characterized the cultural crisis of the later 1960s. Even to suggest the ideals of public service is often to run up against a barrage of sarcastic humor at the expense of what are designated as worn-out symbols of past class oppression. Only that public service is applauded which corresponds to the contemporary *penchant* for social compassion—the old-age pensioners in one decade, the disabled in the next. The approach is often not to an external sanction, but to a kind of calculated hedonism.

Service to the unfortunate is here conceived in collectivist terms: it is often founded upon enlightened self-interest. I do not mean, of course, that there are not large numbers of dedicated and selfless people, especially among the young, who are engaged in helping the disadvantaged. But I do mean that for every one of them you will find another whose paraded concern takes the form of a pressure-group response, with heavy political ulterior purpose, aimed at the material rather than the moral elevation of human society. Existing

external sanctions, then, are not at this time sufficiently well regarded to restore to men the sense that human life is about something other than their personal interests. What, then, is to be done?

A lot of the cure comes through recognition of the nature of the sickness—which is why I have dwelt on it for so long. Prospects can then be canvassed realistically. Since I am myself a sceptic of political solutions, and not a political reactionary, I do not think especially highly of the structures of the traditional societies that have passed away. We must look elsewhere. Many of the modern changes whose effects upon human personality I have been lamenting were, for other reasons, in themselves desirable. All change is a matter of loss and gain; our task is to seek a balance.

How do you preserve the advantages of mass education, of human self-awareness, of the heightened expectations which alone lead to social progress, and, above all, of respect for the integrity of the individual, while at the same time inspiring a daily consciousness of transcendence—a sense that the sanction for our conduct lies outside ourselves? The crisis of culture in our day would suggest that there is no way. And perhaps that is indeed the case. If it is, those who survive us will eventually recognize the present as a highly untypical moment in the story of human development. They will see it as a time of dissolution, between the breakdown of one set of social orthodoxies and the birth or imposition of another set. They will find our helpless surrender to internal desires quite incomprehensible—the more so since we make a virtue of it—and they will find our priority of the personal and the material a monstrous denial of human genius, and perhaps, even, of God's Providence.

But there may be another course, though an undramatic one. As so many of our wrong attitudes, as they seem to me, begin in the classroom and in the media—in the laboratories of social conditioning, for that is what they are—then there, also, is the place of reconstruction. The values disseminated through education can be turned around. "Personality" needs to be replaced by that old-fashioned quality, "character," as a goal of education. Our young people need to be taught the value of inner resource rather than inner self-satisfaction. They need to know that sacrifice of one's own inclinations is a purging experience, and that what is left is better able to be active and useful in a world where imperfection reigns. They need, furthermore, to be informed, by example rather than precept, that ideals have to be tested in action and not by the pure assertion of inner feelings, and that the values a man strives to realize are better than the satisfaction of material demands.

The present moment is not an appropriate one to suggest the external sanction to which men should lift their gaze. In a plural society, as ours in some measure is, there can be no *agreed* truth about the fundamental purposes of human association. But sanctions will appear, no doubt in a healthy conflict of ideologies and beliefs, when people turn outwards from themselves and seek a higher purpose. Doubtless, as in traditional societies, we shall not like the look of some of them.

Humanity has a marvelous resilience, and the mistakes we make in the pursuit of truly creative living are better than the safety we suppose we enjoy when we are contented with material satisfaction. Life was meant to be full of risks. The map of the future is never drawn until we grasp the pen ourselves. It is not pre-ordained by circumstance: it is made by us.