

MODERN AGE

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The Tension of Order and Freedom in the University

R U S S E L L K I R K

UNIVERSITIES WERE FOUNDED to sustain faith by reason—and to maintain order in the soul and in the commonwealth. My own university, St. Andrews, was established in the fifteenth century by the Scottish Inquisitor of Heretical Pravity, to resist the errors of the Lollards, the levellers of that age. The early universities' teaching imparted both order and freedom to the intellect; and that was no paradox, for order and freedom exist necessarily in a healthy tension.

But in our day, as in various earlier times, many universities have lost any clear general understanding of either freedom or order, intellectually considered. So it seems worthwhile to review here the relationship between order and freedom, and the part of a university in maintaining the tension between the two.

Indulge me first in some observations concerning the connection between faith, order, and freedom, all of which are intertwined in university studies. In recent generations, many professors have failed to apprehend the connection. Let us commence with that popular but vague term "freedom."

Freedom is normal for mankind. I mean that ordered liberty is natural for truly human persons. Yet human freedom, like

much else in human normality, is denied at least as often as it is affirmed.

The word "normal" does not really mean "average" or "generally accepted": it means "enduring standard." Human beings have the power either of observing the norms of their nature, or of violating them. So it is that the periods of true social freedom, throughout the course of history, have been shorter than the periods of servitude. Men and women have the privilege and the peril of choosing the life they will lead. Much of the time, in ages past as today, men have used their moral freedom to choose slavery or anarchy instead of ordered liberty.

Living as we Americans do in a nation still substantially free, and perhaps at the end of what has been called the "liberal era," many of us take for granted a degree of freedom which has been bestowed upon us by the painful labors and experiences of our ancestors, over many generations—and which may be ruined in the space of a few years, by folly or neglect. Freedom already has vanished from much of the modern world, and in many lands it never took root. Unless we understand the origins and ends of our liberty, we Americans may learn what it is to lose freedom in a fit of absence of mind. And if the

nature of freedom is misunderstood in the universities, it will be misunderstood everywhere.

As I read history, it seems to me that a high degree of ordered, civilized freedom is linked closely with religious belief. Most liberals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were willing enough to agree that there existed some connection between liberty and property. Yet many of those liberals ignored or denied the bond between religious faith and ordered freedom. "We learn from history that we learn nothing from history," Hegel wrote, in irony. If the great troubles of our time teach mankind anything, surely we ought now to recognize that true freedom cannot endure in a society which denies a transcendent order. A university that ridicules the claims of the transcendent must end without intellectual coherence—and without genuine intellectual freedom.

The first people to be freed from the spiritual bondage of the ancient empires were the Hebrews. It was consciousness of their duty and their hope as children of God which gave them resolution to withstand the life-in-death of the great nations that surrounded them.

A degree of personal freedom still higher was achieved by certain Greek peoples in the sixth and fifth centuries before Christ. This noble freedom decayed when the old Greek religion and morality gave way to sophistry, and "the rude son might strike the father dead." The genius of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle did not suffice to restore the Greek freedom of spirit and law, once belief in the divine ordering of things had dissolved.

Among the Romans, freedom endured so long as the high old Roman virtue prevailed: so long as the Roman piety moved men, the disciplines of *labor, pietas, fatum*. Yet out of the ruins of Rome grew the highest order of liberty man has known: Christian freedom. The depressed masses of the proletariat were given hope by the promise of Christ; the barbarians were taught restraint by the Word. Humanity learnt the lesson of the suffering servant, and came to know that the service of God is perfect freedom.

Medieval liberties, in great part, were the

product of Christian belief. The rights of the towns, the independence of the guilds, the code of chivalry—these arose out of faith in what Burke was to call "the contract of eternal society."

So modern freedom is not the recent creation of a few enthusiastic revolutionaries. Rather, it is a heritage laboriously developed in suffering. Freedom cannot endure unless we are willing to nurture that religious understanding which is its sanction, unless we maintain the springs of ordered liberty. It is worth remarking that the nineteenth-century ideology of "liberalism" generally ignored its religious sources. Some of these liberals, deficient in understanding of the sources, thought of freedom as wholly secular and utilitarian, man-made. Others thought of freedom as a political abstraction, unrelated to religious concepts or to ancient usages. Both these "liberal" views have been hostile toward the Christian idea of the "person" under God. Such liberalism has dominated the universities for a century and more—and not state universities merely.

In these closing decades of the twentieth century, when most of the world is subject to arbitrary dominations, it is the urgent duty of the university to restore an apprehension of the sources of freedom. Even among a people who boast of their liberty, freedom may be lost at the moment of its seeming triumph. Stand upon the Acropolis of Athens, or on the Roman Capitoline, or on the Rock of Athena at Agrigento, and look upon the ruins. The material splendor of those societies was at its height not long before the collapse of faith and liberty. In the name of democracy, of equality, of social justice, it is possible to overturn speedily the genuine order and justice and freedom of modern civilization. "And that house fell; and great was the fall of that house." The university—which Dante called one of the three powers governing society, along with church and state—can ignore the true character of freedom only at the university's grave peril. So let me turn to some brief observations on the relationship between freedom and order, considered intellectually and socially.

"Orders and degrees," John Milton says, "jar not with liberty, but well consist." I

believe that we will be unable, in the university or out of it, to maintain any successful defense of our freedoms until we recognize afresh those principles of order under which freedom in our heritage acquired real meaning. Every right is married to a duty; every freedom owns a corresponding responsibility; and there cannot be genuine freedom unless there exists also genuine order, in the moral realm and in the social realm.

I am saying this: in any just society, there subsists a healthy tension between the claims of order and the claims of freedom. When that tension is well maintained, it is possible to obtain a large measure of justice. This clear understanding was the principal contribution of Edmund Burke to political theory; and the attempt to achieve such a tension or balance is the principal problem of modern practical politics.

Order, in the moral realm, is the realizing of a body of transcendent norms—indeed a hierarchy of norms or standards—which give purpose to existence and motive to conduct. Order, in society, is the harmonious arrangement of classes and functions which guards justice and obtains willing consent to law and ensures that we all shall be safe together. Although there cannot be freedom without order, in some sense there occurs always a conflict between the claims of order and the claims of freedom. Often we express this conflict as the competition between the desire for liberty and the desire for security.

Modern technological developments and modern mass democracy have made this struggle more intense. President Washington observed that “individuals entering into a society must give up a share of their liberty to preserve the rest.” Yet doctrinaires of one ideology or another, in our time, continue to cry out for absolute security, absolute order; or for absolute freedom, power to assert the ego in defiance of all convention. During the past two decades, this clash was readily observed on the typical American campus.

I suggest that in asserting freedom as an absolute, somehow divorced from order, we repudiate our heritage of practical liberty and expose ourselves to the peril of absolutism—whether that absolutism be what Tocqueville calls “democratic despotism” or

what recently existed in Germany and now stands triumphant in Russia, China, and other countries. “To begin with unlimited freedom,” Dostoevski wrote in *The Devils*, “is to end with unlimited despotism.”

When some people—E. H. Carr in England, for instance, or David Lilienthal in America—talk of “freedom,” they seem to mean, really, “material prosperity for the many.” Now material prosperity, pure economic “security,” is not the same thing as either freedom or order. Nor is it the same thing as happiness. An Athenian slave might be more comfortable than many a freeman, but he was not free.

It is quite possible that the person who desires freedom and the benefits of order must be prepared to sacrifice a degree of security. A slave, in Aristotle’s definition, is a being who allows others to make his choices for him. It is quite possible for a man to be materially prosperous, freed from the necessity of choice, and yet servile. It also is possible that such a man may suffer no outrageous personal oppression. But he must always lack one thing, this servile man, and that is true manhood, the dignity of man. He remains a child; he never comes into man’s birthright, which is the pleasure and the pain of making one’s own choices.

Some of these problems of freedom upon which I have touched glancingly here are examined by John Stuart Mill in his essay *On Liberty*—a little treatise that has done much to confuse universities’ discussion of freedom, from his day to ours. There may be found value in that essay, but I think there also is weakness in it, and peril; and adulation of Mill tends to confuse serious discussion of the difficulties of liberty in the current years of Our Lord. We live in the twentieth century, not the nineteenth, and we now experience distresses to which Mill never was exposed. Yet Dr. Henry Steele Commager, not many years ago, informed us that “we cannot too often repair to John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*,” implying that this essay, like the laws of the Medes and the Persians, is immutable. Mill was unaware of any difficulty in closely defining “liberty”—unlike Cicero, who saw the necessity for distinguishing between *libido* and *voluntas*.

To Mill, "liberty" might mean "doing as one likes" or "pursuing one's own good in one's own way" or acting "according to one's own inclination and judgment."

At present, Mill's arguments are being employed interestingly by persons who pretend to believe in an absolute freedom that no society ever has been able to maintain—and this in an age which requires the highest degree of cooperation, when "the great wheel of circulation" upon which our economy and our security depend necessarily is more to us than ever before. Such use of the writings of Mill—or those of a different sort of philosopher, Rousseau—may be encountered among enthusiasts of the New Left, and also among some zealots of the "libertarian" Right. Some of these persons—curiously archaic in their opinions, although they pride themselves upon their preoccupation with "relevance"—are oldfangled Benthamite liberals, dedicated to economic individualism in the age of the atomic pile; others (and these the more ominous) are the newfangled collectivistic liberals, desirous of receiving everything from the state, but insistent that they owe nothing in return—not even loyalty.

So my general argument is this: liberty, prescriptive freedom as we Americans have known it, cannot endure without order. Our constitutions were established that order might make possible true freedom. Despite all our American talk of private judgment, dissent, and individualism, still our national character has the stamp of a respect for order almost superstitious in its power: respect for the moral order ordained by religion, and for the prescriptive political forms that we, more than any other people in this twentieth century, have maintained little altered. We would work immense mischief to our freedom if we ceased to respect our established order, running instead after an abstract, Jacobin liberty.

What is deficient in the thought of Mill and his disciples, it seems to me, is an adequate understanding of the principles of order. First, any coherent and beneficial freedom, surely, must have the sanction of moral order: it must refer to doctrines, religious in origin, that establish a hierarchy of

values and set bounds to the ego. Second, any coherent and beneficial freedom must know the check of social order: it must accord with a rule of law, regular in its operation, that recognizes and enforces prescriptive rights, protects minorities against majorities and majorities against minorities, and gives meaning to the concept of human dignity.

Freedom as an abstraction is the liberty in whose name crimes are committed. But freedom, as realized in the separate, limited, balanced, well-defined rights of persons and groups, operating through historical development within a society moved by moral principles, is the quality which makes it possible for men and women to become fully human.

These things have been said often before. But every grand question has to be argued afresh in every generation—especially in the universities. We need, I repeat, to refresh the understanding of "freedom" even among the learned, or perhaps especially among the learned.

For when many people, professors included, employ nowadays this word "freedom," they use it in the sense of the French Revolutionaries: freedom from tradition, from established social institutions, from religious doctrines, from prescriptive duties. One thinks of Robert Louis Stevenson's little exercise in mockery, "The Four Reformers":

Four reformers met under a bramble bush. They were all agreed that the world must be changed. "We must abolish property," said one.

"We must abolish marriage," said the second.

"We must abolish God," said the third.

"I wish we could abolish work," said the fourth.

"Do not let us get beyond practical politics," said the first. "The first thing is to reduce men to a common level."

"The first thing," said the second, "is to give freedom to the sexes."

"The first thing," said the third, "is to find out how to do it."

"The first step," said the first, "is to abolish the Bible."

"The first thing," said the second, "is to

abolish the laws.”

“The first thing,” said the third, “is to abolish mankind.”

This mood is what Santayana mordantly called “freedom from the consequences of freedom,” confounding nihilism with liberation. For we do not live in an age that is oppressed by the dead weight of archaic establishments and obsolete customs. The peril in our time, rather, is that the foundations of the great deep will be broken up, and that the swift pace of alteration will make it impossible for generation to link with generation. Our era, necessarily, should be what Matthew Arnold called an epoch of concentration. Or, at least, the thinking American, in the university as out of it, needs to turn his talents to concentration, the reconstruction of our moral and social heritage. This is an age not for anarchic freedom, but for ordered freedom.

There survive older and stronger concepts of freedom than that proclaimed by the Jacobins; and more consistent concepts than that of Mill. In Christian teaching, freedom is submission to the will of God. This is no paradox. As he who would save his life must lose it, so the person who desires true freedom must recognize an order that gives all freedoms their sanction. This lacking, freedom becomes at best the liberty of those who possess power at the moment to do as they like with the lives and the property of persons whose interests conflict with theirs.

In the Christian understanding, as in the Judaic tradition and the Stoic philosophy and in Indic thought, there subsists also the conviction that freedom may be attained through abstinence. Not to lust after the things of the flesh, or after power, or after fame: this is true freedom, the freedom of Stilbo confronting the conqueror, or of Socrates before the Athenian jury. This is the freedom of Diogenes asking Alexander to stand out of the sun. The man who has made his peace with the universe is free, however poor he may be; the man bent upon gratifying his appetites is servile, however rich he may be. This freedom from desire, once taught within universities, has a strange ring in universities of our day.

Personal freedom must be found within a moral order. And public freedom must be found within a well-maintained social order; it must be the product of a common historical experience, of custom, of convention. We live in an age which, for good or ill, has come to depend upon the highest degree of cooperation and discipline ever known to civilization. Our economy, our very political structure, might not abide for twenty-four hours the triumph of that “absolute liberty” of the individual preached by Lamartine and other political enthusiasts of the nineteenth century. As Simone Weil put it, “Order is the first need of all.”

Within today’s university, collectivistic prejudices and libertarian prejudices frequently coexist within the same professor, insane conjunction. Both collectivism and libertarianism are the enemies of ordered freedom.

Once upon a time, the university maintained authority; indeed, the university *was* authority. But today a great many people within the Academy will submit to no authority, temporal or spiritual. They desire to be different, in morals as in politics. In our highly tolerant society, such extreme individualism seems an amusing pose. Its consequences may become unamusing.

Against license, anarchy, and chaos, the university was raised up, to restrain passion and prejudice through right reason. What the university offers to intellects is discipline and order. Through such intellectual order and discipline, rational liberty of the person and of the society is made possible. This is true of the humane and the social studies; it is quite as true of the physical sciences. The university is one important response to the universal menace of chaos. I think of some sentences written by an English biologist, Lyall Watson.

“Chaos is coming,” Dr. Watson reminds us. “It is written in the laws of thermodynamics. Left to itself, everything tends to become more and more disorderly until the final and natural state of things is a completely random distribution of matter. Any kind of order, even that as simple as the arrangement of atoms in a molecule, is unnatural and happens only by chance encounters

that reverse the general trend. These events are statistically unlikely, and the further combination of molecules into anything as highly organized as a living organism is wildly improbable. Life is a rare and unreasonable thing.

“The continuance of life depends on the maintenance of an unstable situation. It is like a vehicle that can be kept on the road only by continual running repairs and by access to an endless supply of spare parts. Life draws its components from the environment. From the vast mass of chaotic probability flowing by, it extracts only the distinctive improbabilities, the little bits of order among the general confusion. Some of those it uses as a source of energy, which it obtains by the destructive process of digestion; from others, it gets the information it needs to ensure continued survival. This is the hardest part, extracting order from disorder, distinguishing those aspects of the environment that carry useful information from those which simply contribute to the overall process of decay. Life manages to do this by a splendid sense of the incongruous.” So Watson puts this truth in his chapter entitled “Cosmic Law and Order.”

The university is meant to assist in life’s struggle for survival, by extracting order from disorder. Studies in seventeenth-century literature and ancient history and quantum mechanics all are paths to order. And also they are paths to freedom: for the unexamined life is a servile existence, not worth living. The university is not intended to be a staging-ground for the destruction of order in personality and order in society; on the contrary, the university’s mission (to paraphrase John Henry Newman) is to impart a philosophical habit of mind.

Men and women of a philosophical habit of mind are free intellectually. If their

influence upon a society is strong, that society is free politically. Such private and public freedom is made possible by the ordering of mind and conscience. For the university, as for society generally, freedom and order are ends of equal importance, existing at once in symbiosis and in tension. So it is that when a university forgets the ordering and integrating of knowledge, it impairs the freedom of the mind. And then chaos rushes upon us. In our campus disorders of the Sixties and Seventies, graduate students in the disciplines of philosophy, humane letters, and history were interestingly active in the disruption of classes, the burning of books, and the harassing of professors—which suggests our degree of success, in the typical American university, in this enterprise of developing a philosophical habit of mind. Intellectual chaos promptly brings on social chaos.

Out of faith arises order; and once order prevails, freedom becomes possible. When the faith that nurtured the order fades away, the order disintegrates; and freedom no more can survive the disappearance of order than the branch of a tree can outlast the fall of the trunk. Doubtless there will be technical schools called universities, in the twenty-first century. But whether any institutions resembling genuine universities may be found a hundred years from now—why, like much else, that will depend upon whether fidelity to a mundane order is sustained by renewed belief in a transcendent order. Meanwhile, various eminent professors are cleverly engaged in sawing off the particular limb of the tree of learning upon which they are perched; while a few scholars, aware that the dead tree gives no shelter, have grown concerned for the tree’s parched roots.*

*Based on an address at Pepperdine University.