

"FREE SPEECH" AND "ALL MEN ARE FALLIBLE"

QUOTES FROM RICHARD ROBINSON AN ATHEIST'S VALUES ON THE STATE AND POLITICS AND EQUALITY

Richard Robinson, *An Atheist's Values*, 1964.

Robinson writes, "It is not a good reason for free speech to remark that 'people cannot help what they believe'. They can help publishing what they believe, for they can keep their thoughts to themselves. But, further, they can help what they believe to a large extent; for they can choose whether or not to seek and listen to evidence and argument on both sides of the question, whether or not to try to judge equably on the basis of all available evidence and argument, whether to be reasonable, in short. And their choice in this matter will largely determine what they believe. There are two great and good reasons for free speech. One of them is simply that freedom is a great good, and any suppression of freedom is consequently an evil. And this is a very great and strong reason though it is short to say. The other strong reason for free speech is that the toleration of free speech is far more likely to produce a general spread of true opinion than is the suppression of it; and truth and the general spread of truth are very great goods."

'All men are fallible' ... is not selfrefuting in the obvious sense of selfcontradictory.

But there is another kind of selfrefutation besides selfcontradiction. If a man opens his mouth and says 'I am not speaking now', he makes a selfconsistent but false statement. The peculiarity of it is that the fact, to which one appeals to show that the statement is false, is the utterance of the statement itself. Precisely by uttering the statement he produces the state of affairs in virtue of which the statement is false. (Similarly, if a man says 'I am speaking now', he makes his statement true by uttering it.)

The statement that 'all men are fallible' is not selfrefuting in this way either, for you do not by uttering it produce an infallible man. (It would be remarkably convenient if you could make yourself infallible by declaring that 'all men are fallible'.)

These are the only two ways in which a statement can refute itself, so far as I can see. Either it contradicts itself, or by its utterance it provides a negative instance which disproves itself. Since 'all men are fallible' does neither of these, it is not selfrefuting.

In addition to selfrefutation there is perhaps such a thing as selfstultification. The statement that 'what I say is never worth saying' neither contradicts nor otherwise refutes itself; but it appears to stultify itself. A statement stultifies itself, we may define, if it entails that to assert it would be silly.

The statement that 'all men are fallible' does not stultify itself. On the contrary, if it is true it is very important, and a wise man will assert it from time to time.

I fear that, in spite of these explanations, the uneasy feeling may remain with some of you that the statement that 'all men are fallible' does after all somehow do away with itself. If that is so, I ask you to write down at your leisure exactly how it does this, and then to look for a flaw in what you have written. I think you will probably find a flaw; but, if you do not, bring it to me and I will try to find a flaw in it.

I will give now two examples of finding a flaw in such attempts. People sometimes say that 'those who argue against infallible authority claim infallibility for themselves'. The flaw here is that this is simply false. We do not claim infallibility for ourselves. Every man who utters a statement thereby implicitly claims that that statement is true. But he does not thereby claim that all the statements he ever utters are true. That is, he does not claim that he is infallible. Whenever a man makes a sincere statement he thinks it true; but no sensible man has ever thought that all the statements he had ever uttered or would ever utter were true. The statement that 'all men are fallible' is the same in this respect as the statement that 'all men are mortal'. The speaker of either of them claims to be telling a truth but does not claim to be infallible. Every statement equally claims truth for itself, and every statement equally refrains from claiming that its utterer is infallible.

This is a mistake that has been made by the assailants of infallibility as well as by its defenders. Mill wrote that 'all silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility' (op. cit., p. 79, *Everyman*). This, I regret to have to admit, is false. To silence a discussion is not to assume that one is infallible. The editor who declares that 'this correspondence must now cease', the chairman who forbids the raising of a certain topic, the headmaster who forbids the boys to debate birthcontrol,

are none of them assuming themselves infallible. They are merely assuming themselves to be right in thinking that they ought to silence this particular discussion now. Silencing a discussion is an act of government. Are we to say that all acts of government assume the infallibility of the governor, or that only this special kind of act of government assumes the infallibility of the governor? Both are obviously false, but Mill's sentence implies that one of them is true. However, it is only Mill's expression that is wrong here. What he had in mind was the truth that only a belief in his own infallibility could morally justify a governor in permanently forbidding adult persons to express a certain view (cf. p. 85). But he failed to say clearly that it is a matter of moral justification, not of logical assumption.

Here is a second example of finding a flaw in an attempt to show that the doctrine that all men are fallible disposes of itself. People sometimes think that the proposition that 'we are fallible' entails its own contradictory in the following way: 'Assume that we are fallible; it follows that we may be wrong in saying that we are fallible; and from this in turn it follows that we are infallible.'

The flaw here is that it is false that the second consequence follows. From 'we may be wrong in saying that we are fallible' it does not follow that 'we are infallible'. 'Are' never follows from 'may be'. From possibilities alone one cannot rightly conclude to facts. We may call this fallacy the illicit process from possibility to actuality.

Attempts to increase the virtue and intelligence of the citizens by censorship, or by legal penalties for moral crimes as such, or by religious laws, have the opposite result.

Religious faith being not a virtue but a vice, the State should not try to encourage it.

