

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

Richard Robinson, An Atheist's Values, 1964.

PREFACE

Richard Robinson in this well written and once popular book is clear that secular values are needed and can be justified without God and indeed should be. He did not like the term humanist but did accept being labelled as a liberal. Robinson was a true atheist and nothing in his work can be said to have smuggled in Christian values. For example, he rejects love of neighbour in favour of making a choice not to make others more miserable than what they are or can be. So he is not about good directly. He cautions that good is always flawed and has the power to go wrong. He wants us to give ourselves the gift of living in reality not some illusion.

Richard Robinson warns that nationalism involves myths about wrongs done to the enemy of the nation. He could say the same about culture!

He says the state is not the people.

He says it is obvious that equality is a problem and nobody really believes in equality as achievable across the board. There will always be casualties. To make one equal the wrong way deprives somebody else. For example, if the law proclaims the king's dogs to be people in the eyes of the law that threatens anybody in the kingdom who kills them of facing a murder charge. A degrading attitude to everybody then surfaces for it is not right to tell human beings they can be considered murderers if they kill the dogs. And somebody could easily be thought to have killed them.

Freedom causes problems with the harm principle – do no harm. The freedom to have an abortion can lead to a baby being aborted when it should not have been and had grown into personhood. Religious freedom for many religions has forced female members to abort when it was really too late. You never know what a religion's true power is or what it does until you give a member enough immunity and power. Absolute power corrupts. Religion can only be judged on how well members behave when given such power.

He examines if you defeat yourself by saying all people are fallible. It is true we are but until we see that we are to let evidence teach and direct us we see that we can weed out mistakes so human fallibility is not a problem.

He reminds us that we think too much of when the necessary evil of war should be implemented but what about revolution? Nobody talks about it.

Unlimited power corrodes the conscience and turns even the good evil. I would say that unlimited power is not real but if you have enough of power or all the power you want that can still happen. The power over your little family is all the unlimited power you want. If God does all the decision making you can get unlimited power simply by assenting to him freely. The tyrant has to depend on others for power and you are depending on God. To claim to believe in God is really to make yourself God.

THE QUOTATIONS

Nationalism tends to involve myth. It usually involves the anthropological myth that the citizens of the State are all of the same race and culture and comprise everybody who is of that race and culture. It usually involves also some historical and half-religious myth about the past wrongs suffered by the State. George Orwell brought out this point.

We must insist on the reality of the State and of its absolute right. It is impossible justly to understand human political experience if we reduce the State to a mere convention, an artificial device of individuals to secure their own rights or the objects of their desires, or if we fail to appreciate the sense in which the State is a necessary and natural being, and even prior to the individuals themselves. It does not merely follow from the good pleasure of its citizens; neither do its rights depend solely upon their permissive agreement.

The State's good is sometimes confused with the good of its individual citizens, so that to refuse to aim at the State's good looks like being selfish towards fellow citizens. ... A State is not a people, for 'the people of the plains' and 'the people who like opera' are not States. A State is a certain political organization of certain people. A State is not a government, but it has

a government.

Culture, on the other hand, is something you are not born with but receive after your birth from those you live with. You get it from your parents only if you live with your parents after your birth. You get it from all whom you live with and to the extent to which you live with them. It is a vast complex of habits and traditions of speech and thought and song and action and love and hate.

When the State is distinguished from all these other things, from land and people and government and race and culture and nation and society, and seen to be a political organization, which may or may not cherish certain people and preserve some valuable land or culture or race, the impulse to worship it evaporates. It is an organization like other human organization, more powerful than most of them, hence more capable of evil, but capable also of helping things that may be much better than itself, namely human beings and their cultures.

You observe that I have not taken the positivist line that States do not exist. I have said that they do exist but are not worshipful. States exist, and they cannot be analysed away.

Do I wish all men to be exactly equal in all respects? Anybody who explicitly asks himself that question answers no. I do not wish everyone to have a headache when anybody has a headache. I do not wish all men to be produced by division of the same egg, so that they all have the same genes, appearance, character, and behaviour. I do not wish all girls to be equally black-haired, or all boys equally good at running a mile.

There are, however, many people who have never asked themselves this question and are demanding whatever equalities have engaged their emotions, without considering how far equalization should go or what is the good of it. ...

Do I wish all men to be exactly equal in political power? To answer yes is to be an anarchist.

According to Article 7 of a 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights Approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations, Paris, 10th December, 1948 ... all are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law'. Equality before the law is often demanded; but its air of being selfevidently correct is deceptive. The phrase can mean two quite independent states of affairs. First, it can mean that the law makes no distinctions among human persons, but prescribes exactly the same voting rights for foreigners as for citizens, exactly the same penalty for child murderers as for adult murderers, exactly the same military service for women as for men, and so on. In this sense, equality before the law is a character of the kind of law that is on the statute book; and a student can tell in what respects a State has this kind of equality by reading its laws. But the phrase often carries another meaning, in which you cannot tell whether a State has equality before the laws by reading its statutes, but only by observing how its policemen and judges and jailers carry these statutes out. Do they carry them out impartially on all sorts and conditions of persons, or do they prosecute lawbreakers of class A while forgetting to prosecute lawbreakers of class B? Do they, for instance, prosecute poor young men who steal bread for food and omit to prosecute rich young men who steal street-signs for fun? Do they prosecute pedestrians who occupy a square yard of the road for an hour, and omit to prosecute parking motorists who occupy eight square yards of it for eight hours? And do they extend to all men equally such protection as the law indicates, or do they turn a blind eye to the injuries suffered by some while prosecuting the injuries suffered by others?

Each of these two kinds of equality before the law can exist without the other. Hence we need to ask of each separately whether it is desirable. Should the law, whatever it is, be equally applied to all sorts of persons by its executioners? That is to say, when the law does not itself direct its officers to make discriminations or use their discretion, should they nevertheless do so?

A certain amount of discrimination is inevitable. No law can save the public prosecutor from all need of deciding for himself whether to prosecute a particular person. There are bound to be doubtful cases. There will often be more cases than he has men and money to deal with. He must pick and choose. He may, therefore, do this choosing rightly or wrongly. Is it any use telling him that the principle of right choice is that all are equal before the law? I think it is sometimes of some use. It may remind him of certain specific inequalities which he is tempted to regard but ought to disregard, though he will have to know by some other means what these inequalities are. It may remind him that the inequalities he ought to regard, although they are not mentioned in the law, are only such as are consistent with impartiality and fairness, for example, the inequality between first offenders and habitual offenders, or between young and old offenders. On the whole, it is significant and right to demand equality in the administration of the law, although the administrator will always have to make choices and notice inequalities.

Every law is by its nature a kind of equality, however many inequalities it institutes. Suppose a law to say that white subjects may vote and black subjects may not. Then, while it makes blacks unequal to whites, it leaves every black equal to every other black and every white equal to every other white, and it makes every black and every white equally subject to itself. This measure of equality is inherent in every law that really is a law and not a mere decree about some particular

named person. But it is better to call it the rule of law than to call it any kind of equality. (I owe this point to Professor Berlin's excellent article on equality in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 1955-6.)

To say that all men are in fact equal in every way would be a stupidly false assertion, and would leave no further possible equality to be demanded in politics. That all men are equally valuable in every way appears to be also stupidly false, though something like it is implied whenever someone says 'I am as good as any man', or talks about 'the infinite value of the human soul'. It is also a plain falsehood that all men could, by some practicable arrangements, be brought to be in the future equal in all ways. We never shall be, and never could be, all equal in height and health and strength and longevity and charm and intelligence.

[He talks about how Christian say all people are equal for all people have souls unlike any other animal.] This is wholly unsatisfactory, because 'soul' is a meaningless word. There is no way of teaching a person the meaning of this word, so that to tell him that he has a soul is to tell him nothing.

Equality is a political perversion of that fundamentally unpolitical thing, love.

The word 'freedom', like the word 'equality', is a vague, abstract, and relative term which is offered to us as the name of a great political good. ... 'X is free' is an incomplete statement, like 'X is equal' or 'X is prepared'. X is prepared for what? X is equal to what and in what respect? X is free from what, and to do what?"

Freedom is often harmful. Any kind of act will be harmful in some cases. Therefore freedom to do a certain kind of act will be harmful in some cases, no matter what kind of act you mention. Freedom of the press, for example, includes the freedoms to ignore important events, to keep silent about evil deeds committed by newspapers or journalists, and to pester suffering persons who are news. This question is hard to distinguish from the question of the value of States and governments in general. Why have them at all? Only because in some way or other they increase welfare. Thus it seems that every State is necessarily a welfare State; and yet we think of the welfare State as something new. It is no doubt a matter of degree. It is a great difference of degree whether the State is or is not a universal provider of education, of houses, of medical attendance. It cannot be right to say that the State should try to provide all the elements of welfare. It is certainly right to say that it should try to provide some of them. So we may say that State action towards general freedom from want is certainly desirable to some extent, but the question just what State action is always to be answered anew. I add that I think it is better to classify this matter under the head of freedom as little as possible.

The concept of freedom is very liable to muddles, because of its complicated and negative nature and its emotional importance. ... freedom has often been confused with power ... Freedom is in truth the absence of other men's interference with my exercise of the powers which I have by my nature."

A certain fact has inflated this muddle to enormous size, namely the ambiguous status of the laws of economics. Are they laws of nature or laws of man? If they are laws of man they can be abrogated, and that would give us back a freedom in the enduring and proper sense of 'freedom'. But if they are laws of nature they cannot be abrogated, but at best circumvented or used to our advantage; and using them to our advantage would give us more freedom only in the new and improper sense of more power.

To demand toleration for someone is thus not merely to assert that we should leave him free. It is to reassert this, or very nearly this, after someone has interjected 'except to do evil'. To demand toleration is to demand that people shall be left free even to do evil in many cases.

Robinson discusses how the law stops you hurting others but not necessarily yourself, and that any attempt to outlaw harming yourself "fails because it depends on a distinction that cannot be made in practice, the distinction between harmful actions that harm only the agent and those that harm others too. But, even if this distinction never can be rightly made, many authorities do in fact appeal to it, for they claim to be restraining a person 'for his own good'; and Mill's principle says that this is an improper claim in any case. Mill's principle involves that, whether or not it is possible to find actions that harm the agent without harming anyone else, the claim that the action harms the agent is never a good reason for the State to forbid it.

The State may not interfere with the individual merely on the ground that his action is morally wrong. That an act is contrary to the moral law is no good reason for suppressing it. Neither the government nor any other body or person has a right to enforce all moral rules all the time. Neither the State nor any church has a right to prevent men from doing what they ought not to do as such. The view that 'the State has a right to punish all moral delinquency' (Montague, op. cit., p. 192) is false; and is probably held only by confusion with the view that the State has a right to compel a man to be moral when by so doing it can prevent great harm to others. What gives the State a right here is the possible harm to others, not the immorality of the act. If all morally wrong acts were legally forbidden by the State, there would be no difference between morality and legality, and the duty to obey the government would be man's only duty, and no one could ever do the right thing in spite of there being no compulsion to do it. That is, no one could ever do right 'of his own free will' as we

say.”

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.

Democracy tends towards prosperity.

Acton wrote that 'the possession of unlimited power corrodes the conscience, Robinson shows how communism has religions main trait, "The Communist has faith in the doctrines of Marx or Lenin precisely in that no evidence or argument could make him abandon them. To desiderate a democratic faith, in this sense, would be to long to enjoy the delights of fanaticism and cease being a reasonable person, to desire to be dispensed from the duty of weighing evidence and holding oneself always prepared to change one's view in case of new considerations altering the balance of probability. Communism is indeed a faith, a religion, in a very large part of the sense of those words. It shares the counter-rational character of what is usually called 'religion', though not its theism; and the threat of Communism against reason today is a little like the threat of primitive Christianity against the reasonableness of the Greeks and Romans."

People talk about just war but don't like to talk about revolution. Robinson writes, When, if ever, is there a moral duty or right to attempt the illegal overthrow of the governors? Certainly there could sometimes be such a moral duty. There could be a monstrously harmful governor who could not be legally removed but could by illegal means be replaced with someone much less harmful; and if this happened revolution would evidently be a moral duty. Can we then write any principle bearing on the matter? Dr. Popper has written that 'the use of violence is justified only under a tyranny which makes reforms without violence impossible, and should have only one aim, that is, to bring about a state of affairs which makes reforms without violence possible' (The Open Society, U.S. ed., p. 340). This implies both that violence may be right under a tyranny and that violence is never right under a democracy. I have found by writing to him that Dr Popper allows one case where violence may be right even under a democracy, namely where the country is about to cease to be a democracy and some illegal action might prevent this.

By 'utopianism' I mean the idea that there is a perfect constitution, and politics could be perfect.

...

Utopianism often leads to excessive moralizing and indignation in politics. He who believes that society could be perfect easily becomes indignant at politicians who effect compromises. Hence the New Statesman type of politics, consisting in moralistic abuse of everything that is done. Let our politics consist in specific proposals for the future, not in abuse of the past. Let us spread the convictions that evil is always with us, that politics is always a choice of evils, and that democracy, for the reasons I have recited, is the best of the very imperfect constitutions which alone are possible.

COMMENT: Christianity offers utopia not in this world but the next which is worse. Utopia in this world leads to trouble but also a lot of good and the realities of life will make it crumble if it is flawed. A Utopia in the next life is more dangerous for if it is bad reality cannot dismantle it.