

INDIVIDUALISM AND ITS CONTEMPORARY FATE.

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The home base of the Mont Pelerin understanding of the world is economics, but philosophers were involved in its creation and the moral implications of freedom were central to the thought of its founder Friedrich Hayek. My concern in this paper is to explore what I take to be the essence of freedom, and to locate it in the context of our civilisation. Described thus, the idea is insanely ambitious, and all I can do is sketch a position. I shall identify freedom with individualism, and discuss first its emergence, then its established character in the eighteenth century, and finally say something about its paradoxical place in the world today.

Individuality is a universal characteristic of objects, but individualism is the practice that accords to some personal acts, beliefs and utterances a legitimacy that may conflict with the dictates of custom or authority. Today, this practice is usually formulated as “self-interest”, which makes it clear that individualism may liberate some individual wants from customary controls. As self-interest, individualism is often wrongly identified with the moral vice of selfishness, and gets a bad press. Sometimes it is foolishly attacked as “consumerism”, and described as “hyper-individualism” or the mania for accumulating material goods. These hostile characterisations are part of contemporary rhetoric to which we shall return. Let us begin, however, by sketching the emergence of freedom in its individualist form.

1. Ambivalence and the Coming of Modernity.

We inherit various aspects of our freedom from the Greeks, the Romans and the barons of the feudal period, but in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, something new was beginning to appear. Urbanisation and printing were its essential preconditions, and it took many forms, but in all cases, the enterprise of individuals was at the heart of it. If the coming of freedom may be grasped in terms of any single formula, we might invoke that of Martin Luther writing on Christian freedom. Jesus came, Luther affirmed, to free us from the law into a higher dutifulness. These words make it clear why, whatever religious beliefs we may entertain, Christianity is and remains at the heart of our civilisation. They also reveal why Luther’s doctrines led to endless conflict. The question is: what might these terms – “law” and “higher dutifulness” - signify? For Luther, clearly the law was Judaic, and the higher dutifulness was Christian piety subject to divine grace. Luther was taking his followers back to what he understood to have been the pure origins of their faith. On the other hand, the “law” from which we might seek to be freed might in individualist

terms be any restraint that a critical spirit encounters. Consider, for example, Montaigne's use of this structure of thought when he remarked: "Wherever I wish to turn, I have to break through some barrier of custom, so carefully has custom blocked all our approaches."¹ Such a formula might equally, however, become a dangerous incitement to any lunatic who wanted to shrug off all restraint, or spread some rabble-rousing gospel of his own. What then makes this the insight that lies at the heart of individualism?

Human life is everywhere subject to customs, rules and restraints, but in most cultures these things change more or less insensibly. In European cultures, by contrast, we have a world in which rising generations develop new enterprises and often challenge the assumptions by which their parents lived. Some old "laws" are rejected, and generally some new "dutifulness" emerges. Enterprise is the key, and competition is the result, and this pattern is to be found not only in economic endeavours, but in ideas, in moral sentiments, in science, religious convictions and everywhere else.

Human beings everywhere experience ambivalence about one or other area of life, and such feelings are a serious danger to the settled order of things. Our evaluation of most things in our lives varies not only from person to person but sometimes even from moment to moment. In Europe, however, we find the one civilisation that found a way of combining ambivalence with social order. Ambivalence thus liberates the critical spirit, and is at the heart of many of the disagreements and conflicts among which we live. In our free societies, such attitudes can be entirely compatible with civility. The skill of combining ambivalence with civility did not come easily even to Europeans, and was especially difficult in early modern times when disputes about Christian theology and practice were at their most passionate. It took time before religious tolerance came to be a standard feature of European societies. In politics, to take another area of social life, centuries were to pass before we institutionalised the debate between government and opposition as the standard way of conducting public business. First religion, later socialism and nationalism could subject the harmony of European states to severe strains, but the eventual outcome was a condition of society not only remarkably free and tolerant, but also resilient and outstandingly prosperous. As modern European societies became prosperous and technologically inventive, even those who hated toleration and feared conflict had no alternative but to take notice. Everyone then wanted to understand the "secret" of European power and prosperity.

The basic "secret", one might say, is that modern European states were distinguished from other cultures by the moral practice of individualism, in which the wants and beliefs of individuals are recognised not as disruptive but as valuable in themselves. Intellectually speaking, individualism led to a revolution in the way in which Europeans thought about the world. The solid realities of traditional societies dissolved into subjective and objective components out of which Europeans were able in some degree to construct a world they found congenial. It was not at all irrelevant to this kind of pluralism that Europeans were divided into different cultural realms or states, each with its own language and traditions. These "national" variations stimulated each other. Custom, rank and religion continued to be powerful elements in life, but alongside these universals of human experience had emerged something new:

¹ Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, Penguin 1958, p. 119, "On the custom of wearing clothes."

the recognition of difference as having a value of its own. The corresponding tendency at the level of the state was the appearance of sovereign rulers, who could repeal laws without having to break them or ignore them. The right to repeal a law (whatever might be understood as “law” in this context) was essential in facilitating an unbroken moral legitimacy over the generations. The rule of law was thus to be distinguished from the commands of any ruler disposing of despotic powers; indeed, law must, of course, be distinguished from any sort of command, for law is not something we obey, but something to which we conform. Slaves may have to obey, but subjects conform to a law.

How did this new social and moral world differ from that of other cultures? The answer lies in the fact that in other cultures, custom and religion (along with the usual admixture of human caprice) determined the manner of life, subject to local variations. But whatever these variations, people in non-European societies lived in terms of what was believed to be the One Right Order of life. It supplied for each individual both a social location and a corresponding set of duties and expectations. Such in the most notably elaborated civilisations were the Hindu caste system, the Muslim Sharia and the hierarchies of the Middle Kingdom. And the basic point about these systems, and of every other, down to tribal cultures, was that those living in such a world regarded their customs as the one right way of life. One consequence of this belief was a remarkable lack of curiosity about how other peoples lived. Lack of curiosity resulted from the belief that one need not take an interest in “error.” Other ways of life were simply – wrong! In fact, of course, most people in earlier times knew virtually nothing about the rest of the world. This contrast became one of the most conspicuous differences between European individualism and the traditional practices of other cultures. Europeans were, from an early period, profoundly interested in how others lived, just as they were fascinated by the character of other individuals. Shakespeare’s creation of characters – irresolute such as Hamlet, lovers such as Romeo – expressed an attitude that corresponded to Montaigne’s reflections on the parochiality of our judgements about how others lived.

An interest in other ways of life fed the scepticism inseparable from the emergence of our individualist world. In this new world, even truth is subject to the bumps and bruises of competition. One typical figure was the poet John Milton who believed that competition brought forth truth, and who challenged the doctrine of divorce on the basis of affirming the virtue of charity. In a world of printed books, the number of truths competing for the prize of recognition constantly multiplied. It was obvious from the very beginning, of course, that individualism causes conflict, and the same instinct that generates a dream of peaceful uniformity that ruled every other culture was also to be found in Europe. The price of such a dream is, of course, arbitrariness and repression. That passion for uniformity appeared in the early modern belief among European rulers that whatever other variations might be recognised, no state could be stable without a universal religious confession. It has taken a long time for this version of a basic homogeneity of belief to sink to the level of an abandoned superstition, but new forms of the one right order of belief keep appearing. They inspired, of course, the totalitarian projects of the last century.

Here then in sixteenth century Europe was the appearance of a quite new and remarkable moral practice, and in a philosophically sophisticated civilisations such as our own, it was soon theorised in a variety of different ways. In political thought,

Hobbes, Locke and Montesquieu were notable contributors to such understanding. Montesquieu was in a sense the Aristotle of modern political thought in that he supplied a taxonomy that recognises the basic features of this new modernity. He recognised in most non-European states a form of rule based on fear, which he called “despotism.” He also distinguished a heroic classical model of rule, based on virtue, something no longer possible to Europeans. This model was that of a republic. Modern Europe, however, had its own distinctive form. It was essentially monarchical, a condition in which, living under a rule of law, men enjoyed the citizenly freedom of personal security against the caprice of civil power. This was part of what we understood by “freedom”. The essence of the moral life practised in monarchies was identified by Montesquieu as “honour”, a term associated with high rank, but which we may understand as a recognition of individualism. In other words, the individualist as moral agent was concerned not only with the question of whether such and such an act was right or wrong, but also with what the act might reveal about his own character. In illustration, Montesquieu cited the case of the Viscount of Orte, who was in charge of Bayonne when, after the massacre of St. Bartholemew in 1572, he was ordered by Charles IX to kill the Huguenots of the city. Orte refused, replying that his army did not consist of executioners. The right thing was to obey the king, the wrong thing was to massacre innocent people. In other words, individualism introduced into human life a significant moral complexity that was distinct from the custom and religion determining the right thing in other cultures. Max Weber referred to one aspect of this complex movement of things as the Protestant Work Ethic.

2. The Autonomy of Robinson Crusoe.

By the eighteenth century, the modern world had settled down, and religious conflict had become, in many areas, marginal, but the meaning of individualism remained a central preoccupation of Europeans. One of its great myths was the story of Robinson Crusoe as a remarkably self-sufficient individual creating his own world from scratch. Ernest Gellner identifies Crusoe with Descartes, who was in a sense the founder of modern philosophy, and pointed out that other cultures could not generate a Crusoe figure. A Hindu Brahmin, for example, could not live a proper life as a Crusoe figure without the services of members of other castes, and similar forms of social dependence are to be found in most cultures. Indeed, there might even be problems for a Roman Catholic Crusoe, lacking a priest to administer the sacraments. Crusoe is a myth, of course, because he is not natural man in a wilderness, but a skilled creature generated by a culture with abundant knowledge and access to many artefacts contained in the vessel on which he was wrecked. But here is a heroic image of European man in all his individual resourcefulness exhibiting dramatically the self-sufficiency of Europeans. To be an individualist in this sense meant that social relations (family, friends, associates etc.) were chosen rather than kin-determined, and all the stronger for that. Crusoe’s great adventure was that of a solitary, but he was certainly not a social atom, and like Europeans in general, he was nested or embedded not only in a cultures, but normally in a social world of family, friends and associates of many kinds.

The moral point of Crusoe lies in his independence of mind, and it reflects the fact that freedom in European societies is not an ideal, or a mere value, but an element in the practical life of these societies. It is how many of them live their lives. Hilaire Belloc claimed that Christianity had abolished slavery, and although both the acts and

opinions of some Christians over a long period were ambivalent on this question, one can see what he means. The barbarian kingdoms that arose out of the collapse of the Western Empire had slaves, but by the time we enter the modern world, slavery has gone. And at the end of the eighteenth century again, English reformers abolished the slavery that had arisen as an opportunistic and profitable trade. In the United States, an even more intractable form of slavery was painfully abolished through a civil war. The point is not only that Europeans themselves want to be free to manage their own lives according to their own judgements, but that they also have a taste for dealing with other people on the same terms.

This preference poses a moral problem. It arises from the fact that virtue is generally understood as moral agents subordinating their own desires to whatever is good for others. The virtues of each person in a traditional society, for example, are social because complementarity is the basis of such communities. To be “social” is to be part of a world of mutual dependence. But how are we to understand individualist societies in which each individual is seeking to advance his own interests? Such individuals would seem to be competitive, or in modern jargon, to be playing a zero-sum game. Abstractly (but not in the real world) every benefit to X is a disbenefit to Y. This is the nexus that has identified capitalism with selfishness. It is an identification that continues to haunt our world.

The issue has deep roots in moral thought. For over a century before Adam Smith’s The Wealth of Nations, philosophers and theologians had boldly toyed with the idea that a modern commercial society might in practice be possible on the basis of little virtue, or indeed no virtue at all. It might be possible to have a tolerable society sustained by a collection of hypocrites doing the right thing merely because they feared punishment, or loss of reputation. This was a line of thought that in one sense culminated in Mandeville’s satirical Fable of the Bees, in which prosperity was a function of vices such as vanity, self-indulgence and legal quibbling. The traditional identification of goodness with the ideal society seemed to have been lost. “Morality” at its most demanding seemed directly contradictory to peace and prosperity. Commercial societies such as that of England almost seemed to find themselves in the uncomfortable position of resting upon vice. This problem found one important resolution in a canonical statement by Adam Smith: a man intending his own gain (Smith wrote) “is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor [Smith significantly adds] is it always the worse for society that it was no part of it. . . I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good.”²

The deep wisdom of that last remark must be clearly recognised. The point is that there is a sense in which each person is an infallible judge of his or her own interests. We cannot, of course, exclude the ubiquity of human folly, but the point is that no outsider has as good a grasp of my interests as I do. But what is it to support “the public good”? Heads get broken and societies collapse from disagreement on that question.

Smith’s famous remark is, then, a kind of revolution in moral sensibility. Something previously dismissed as a kind of vice was being admitted to a better class

² Adam Smith, The Wealth of Nations, Book IV Chapter II.

of moral standing. It was becoming clear that alongside the state, and a legal order, and also the broader thing called “society”, a new and independent structure of things was coming into being, which we now call an “economy.” It was based upon production and consumption, and had its own laws and processes. It had its own moral structure. A framework of social interdependence had been replaced by a dynamic division of labour which combined competitiveness with its own kind of complementarity. One enormous benefit was the generation of prosperity, yet commercial societies could never quite break free entirely from negative images. Christians worried about the idolatry of worshipping money – Mammon rather than God. Collectivists yearning for peace and uniformity pointed to the problems inseparable from freedom. Hostile images of what later came to be called “capitalism” soon generated a never ceasing stream of proposals to replace the supposedly chaotic and selfish interests of individuals by central direction in the interests of all.

3. The New Context of Individuality.

Individualism emerged unmistakably at the beginning of the modern world, and by the eighteenth century it was in its heyday. Let us now consider its fate in our post-1945 world. But before we revert to Luther’s interesting formula, let me make a general point that has changed everything. .

The moral and political issues raised in governing a modern European state have been complicated by the appearance of a new consideration: the social. Europeans, already in love with technology, began to think of society itself as a machine that might possibly become the object of managed improvement. Such a project merged with the millennial passions of Christianity, and the outcome was the project of social transformation. Needless to say, the project took many forms, but nearly all of them were collectivist. The aim was to turn an association into a community, with special definitions of both those terms. “Association” results from people choosing to be together. It depends on will, whereas in a true “community”, each person finds his or her identity in the good of the whole. Public policy in our time came increasingly to be judged in the light of its supposed consequences for bringing about a better society. The hope was that politicians would bring a bit of decent benevolence to the profit-driven calculations of economic enterprise. All of this revealed a remarkable simplicity of mind, but it was designed for simple people. The addition of democracy to the constitutional practices of European states gave this idea a great boost, for what else would the people want, politicians often thought, if not a better – notionally a more equal – society?

This passion for a better society, cultivated in churches, universities, non-governmental organisations and in many other places was not seriously compromised by the murderous careers of Nazis and fascists. Even the collapse of central direction in the USSR, long loved by intellectuals for its socially improving intentions, did not discourage people from thinking that there must be a better way of managing our world than letting individuals seek their own betterment. European states, however successful, prosperous, tolerant and peace-loving, could never escape some variant of the hostile image of capitalism classically expressed by Marx and Engels in the Manifesto. Hence public policy bifurcated: political wisdom sought to sustain a state whose business was with such essentials as law and order, national security, the suppression of corruption and the control of power, while a shadowy “social just”

sought at the same time to advance social equality. In recent times, rulers even find themselves being seduced by a whole new technology claiming to reveal the secrets of public happiness. Let us return, however, to Luther's interesting formula.

One version of the "law" from which we have been released is certainly that of personal commitment, above all in the form of marrying, and creating families. Men and women do indeed often live together, and sometimes have children, but fewer get married. It is as if all those bold "experiments in living" that surfaced in Bohemian circles early in the twentieth century - trial marriages, for example - had become for many the wisdom of the moment. And in this area, two well known developments have been striking. The first is the liberation of sexual morality from the many conventions that even individualist societies had retained. Sex is so powerful a drive that all societies seek to harness it to desirable ends such as stability and the creation of new generations. Contemporary Europe has marginalised these conventions, and stability and demography have suffered accordingly. Worse, perhaps, the common identification of morality itself with sexual mores has diffused a widespread opinion that all moral principles were merely a matter of taste.

The decline of serious commitment is also, of course, an enfeeblement of identity, because the individualist of past times found his reality in his identification with family, with disinterested pursuits, and with the nation to which he or she belonged. Commitment has been eroded as the result of subterranean shifts in moral sentiment, but not from those alone. For in our time, the marvellous technological inventiveness of the West has tipped us over into a form of life in which convenience trumps integrity. Punctuality is less pressing when one can rearrange matters by a quick message on the cell phone. Sex need no longer threaten us with procreation. Letters to friends often give way to emails, which reflect the impulses of the fingers rather more than the considered judgement of the mind. I generalise of course, and we must remember that any Western state contains layers of sentiments and practices, some dating from quite remote pasts. It is what makes us so interesting. The respectability cherished a century ago, for example, has now become an object of mockery - but not to everybody.

Our time has thus been a graveyard of inherited conventions. These have been the "law" from which, in Luther's formula, we were released. Can we discover, then, a "higher dutifulness" into which we have evolved? I think we can. It is, I suggest, an admiration for feelings of compassion, and for the virtue of benevolence towards abstract classes of people. We believe in a duty to respond to the unsatisfied needs of others. The remarkable thing about this moral concern is that it has also become the most powerful political project of our time. It is a generalised claim on the resources of both individuals and states, and these resources themselves reduce, of course, to the resources of individuals (and corporations) since states have no resources of their own. That junction of moral approval and political conviction resembles the early modern belief that the unity of a state required agreement on a single religious confession. Here in the idea of global benevolence is a moral sentiment that has progressed way beyond the judgement of Europeans themselves, and found its most authoritative statement in universal declarations of rights, but it takes many forms. Feats of athletic derring-do, for example, are now often performed as incentives for sponsors to contribute to some deserving cause. Those who want to "make a difference" are thinking of the needy, and those keen to "give something back to

society” seek to put their money or their energies behind some form of redistribution. We are all born, as it were, debtors to society, and ought to work on repaying that debt. Business corporations are admired if they exhibit “social responsibility” by devoting some of their profits to good causes rather than to the shareholders who have staked them.

A standard form of politico-moral reproach has long been to condemn those who “put profit before people.” In the higher reaches of philosophy, normative thinkers follow John Rawls in identifying justice with “fairness”, an ideal none the less interesting because the concept of fairness can hardly be translated into any other language. The grand ideal of social policy turns out to be to maximise the equal consumption of welfare without weakening the regrettable need to incentivise the self-interested, the workers and the entrepreneurs, who must keep prosperity ticking over. In an ideal society, we would all be egalitarians rather than maximisers of profit. A whole new social sector has grown up composed of Non Governmental Organisations devoted to charitable aid, both in the society itself, and in the more impoverished parts of the world. These NGOs in turn have extensive links with the broad international drive towards global equalisation of consumption, and states act as good global citizens in conforming to a great variety of international commitments to implement human rights and aid the victims of bad fortune. Another large element of this abstract benevolence consists in the equal distribution of social respect. Many officials are employed both by governments and private corporations to discourage, and often to punish, a variety of unsound responses to women, homosexuals, ethnic immigrants, the disabled and many other classes of person. .

An ethic of abstract benevolence is obviously in need of a correlate: whom must one be benevolent to? The condition that philosophers long considered as the problem of the poor has been elaborated into terms such as “deprived”, “underprivileged”, the “unfortunate” and more generally “oppressed”, but the key term today has come to be that of vulnerability. There is a case for regarding feminists as the pioneers of this new move: women were vulnerable in a whole variety of ways – to violence, oppression, glass ceilings, to sexual harassment and no doubt other evils yet to be formulated. The feminist slogan that “the personal is the political” came to mean that personal security for women could only be achieved by state intervention. Women thus sought to escape the uncertainties of family protection by moving into the legally determined protections of the state. Vulnerability has turned out to be a useful category and soon other groups in society were claiming recognition as vulnerable – ethnic newcomers, homosexuals, transsexuals, children, problem families, those taking drugs, old people, those with learning difficulties, the disabled, and so on.

Vulnerability also turned out to have the useful property of multiplying vulnerable classes of people. Thus girls were thought to be disadvantaged at school, but rapidly came to excel at examinations – thus creating a whole new class of the vulnerable, in the form of poorly performing boys, especially if working class. Victims of burglary were, as victims, evidently vulnerable, and were commonly offered counselling by the police. The real, society-transforming character of this evolution of moral sentiments, however, is revealed in the fact that the burglars themselves, especially if young, were also thought to have been “vulnerable”. They had been failed by society. It is remarkably difficult to escape classification as vulnerable.

4. Individualism and the Paradoxes of Contemporary Moral Sentiment.

That victimisers are themselves victims might well alert us to the fact that this new moral world is a tangle of contradictions. Collective benevolence as we have been considering it may well seem to announce a society far more kind and gentle than that of a couple of generations ago. Out goes hanging and flogging, in comes counselling and “rehab”, as it were. Physical pain, execution, indigence, derision and lack of respect are just a few of the painful experiences we have now abolished. Are we then a nicer set of people? Alas not. For why are all these vulnerable people so vulnerable? It is because society is dominated by racists, sexists, paedophiles, exploiters, bullies and many others whose destructive passions can only be tempered and suppressed by the enlightened elite who manage the state. In other words, the recessive side of this explosion of compassion is an insistence on the nastiness of our fellow citizens.

A further paradox seems to me even more striking. It arises from those hostile images of “capitalism” (alias a free society) that have been a constant expression of European critical self-understanding. No matter how much Western states have exceeded all others in tolerance and prosperity, the dream of an ideal society goes on revitalising the idea of how awful we are. Commercial society, as represented in this image, is composed of social atoms in which man is alienated from man. Capitalism is a rat race in which “greed is good” and each man’s hand is against every other. Yet the history of European states in the last few centuries has been virtually the opposite of this representation. These states have exhibited a social cohesion so remarkable that nothing matched them. Perhaps the most dramatic instance of this cohesion occurred in 1914 when an outburst of patriotic feeling effortlessly mobilised Europeans in support of their national states. We may perhaps regret that it was the alarms of war that dramatised this togetherness, but the fact itself leaves for dead any idea that freedom divides people from each other. Far from falling apart in a crisis, these states exhibited a cohesion seldom seen before. The astonishing fact is that “capitalism” and community go well together, even if it is not the kind of abstract community that communist ideologists so fatally tried to institute.

The hostile image of Western societies is thus false. But what is it that makes this paradoxical? The answer is to be found in the character of contemporary Western societies. They are marked as we have seen by a notable collapse of commitment. Men and women do of course follow their instincts and often set up house together; much less frequently they marry each other. A similar lack of commitment relates individuals to the states in which they live. On the contrary many Westerners, in their detachment from their own “natural allegiances”, often reject the foreign policies of their governments, as some remarkable Americans did, in believing after 9/11 that “we had it coming.” Here, then, is a posture of abstract virtue that congratulates itself on being a rational transcending of supposedly “uncritical” allegiances.

One notable consequence of this Western collapse of commitment in personal areas is that increasing numbers of individuals live alone. They are called, I believe, “singletons”. And the reason for this atomised condition is not the commercial force of capitalism, but the eroding effect of welfare upon the material conditions that in earlier generations sustained family loyalty. The paradox is, then, that the capitalism of commercial societies exhibited a remarkable social cohesion, and that there has been a collapse into atomism resulting from the growth of welfare. No less

remarkable is the fact that democratic politicians who “shower welfare” upon their citizens are despised as bribing pygmies, whereas the politicians of earlier times (when governments supplied nothing of this sort) had no trouble in commanding popular respect.

There is a further point all too seldom recognised in the hostile images of European individualism. The liberatory character of Western freedom results from its recognition of the legitimacy both of autonomous individuals and of independent institutions, and the result has been a remarkable explosion of disinterested pursuits. A “disinterested pursuit” is one that results not from self-interest, but from a detached concern with some activity done for its own sake. The classic example of this passion for the disinterested was the emergence of universities from the twelfth century onward, but this same disinterested passion will be found in the development and institutionalisation of sport and games in the West, in the charitable endeavours of the rich in creating everything from homes for the poor to the grand collections of art galleries and museums, in the efflorescence of hobbies and inventiveness that has marked our civilisation, the integrity of our legal arrangements, and in much else.

From this point of view, the most alarming feature of our times is that the very concept of “disinterestedness” has almost disappeared from the language. Our world wants a bang from every buck. The point of anything valuable is to exploit it for some contemporary benefit, a kind of greed for advantage remarkably destructive of the free and disinterested creativity that has made European modernity the exemplar of what it is to be civilised. In a world of creeping utilitarianism, everything we do must have some practical point. Indeed, there is a practical bias in our thought such that in asking the question: “why did people do X?” the clinching answer always takes the form of revealing that some practical interest was being pursued. The result is that every time disinterestedness creates something great – from the rules of cricket to the cultivation of mathematics – states (and sometimes corporations) step in to try to control and direct it. “Interests” have a positive lust to control “the disinterested”, but even worse is the fact that they even deny its reality. Hayek and the exponents of the Mont Pelerin world responded to “the crisis of their time”, and we must respond to the special circumstances of ours. And among the many candidates for being thus described – collectivism, out of control compassion, quantitative easing and so much else – I would specify the destruction of disinterestedness as the heart of the matter.

What, in so complex a world, has become of Robinson Crusoe, the archetypal individualist, whose whole life was an exploration of what could be made of nature, and of his own sentiments? Crusoe figures still exist, of course, but our conception of society has changed radically. Eighteenth century Europe was a set of states understood as associations of independent individuals. Twenty first century Europe can only be recognised as an association of vulnerable people in need of help and guidance. But in order to manage their own vulnerability, these people have been equipped with a set of unconditional entitlements, or rights. Sir Henry Maine famously characterised the emergence of the modern world as a move away from status towards contract.³ Contract is essentially conditional; status is not. An

³ In *Ancient Law*, 1861. The growth of the idea of entitlements is a large subject in itself. British Members of Parliament in recent times notoriously thought themselves “entitled” to every kind of “expense” arising from being in London. Several generations back, Members of Parliament were not paid at all. The point about rights and entitlements is that they are essentially consumerist, and

association of people equipped with rights or entitlements is thus a society into which individuals are increasingly assigned a status. In welfare theory, entitlements are things which are owed to those who cannot help themselves – the disabled, for example. A status bringing entitlement to assistance – to unconditional medical help, for example, or support when out of work – is a release from the ordinary obligations individuals have always had to manage on their own account. It is no doubt a benefit, for rather passive people, to be relieved of these strivings, but the individual has no control over their substance. Such individuals are at the mercy of their governmental masters. And dependence beyond the protection all governments should provide is, of course, an erosion of freedom.

We thus arrive at a last paradox: that the conditional and contractual relations associated with capitalism directly stimulate social association, while the unconditional status of entitlements does precisely the opposite. We are wary of others, including families, because they make claims upon us. Needing others less, we spend our lives attending to our own feelings. It might seem as if this new welfarist world of entitlements is a triumph of individualism. People, relieved at last of some of the need for thrift and prudence by the provision of general welfare, would be able to use their resources (or rather the pocket money left to them after tax) in doing whatever they might choose. An explosion of free choice at last? Alas not. For here we encounter the ultimate confusion in understanding individualism. In our contemporary world, choice certainly abounds, but it is a choice of the trivia, disconnected from the moral commitments of earlier times, the commitments that alone made individual choice the essence of freedom. Instead of responding to rational desires about the management of life, contemporary choice degenerates into a twitch responding to the hedonistic beckonings of impulse.

The glamour of individualism to outsiders came from its prosperity and its freedom from external controls – its autonomy. This was, however, a surface sustained by subterranean virtues such as courage, integrity, commitment. The autonomy of a moral agent now seems to be shaded by a relentless concern with mere life, honour shaded by a willingness to fall in with guidance about “lifestyle” and responsibility by a disposition to interpret human beings as creatures of social circumstance. Virtues, by re-description, can turn into vices, vices into virtues. People always vary greatly, and there is, of course, a lot of ruin in a nation. But in the eighteenth century, there was also a power of regeneration. Is there still?

therefore integrity and other essentials of the moral life disappear, because rights constitute an unconditionally beneficial rule. Similar problems with malefactors claiming “I never broke the rules” have arisen in Canada, which had the interesting problem of translating “entitlement” into French. The Gomery Commission came up with “la culture du tout m’est dû” or “the culture of “everything is mine by right” or “everything is owed to me.” See Barry Cooper, “Political Order and the ‘Culture of Entitlement’: Some Theoretical Reflections on the Gomery Commission” in Jurgen Gebhardt (ed.) Political Cultures and the Culture of Politics, Heidelberg 2010.