

The Abolition of Genius

Charles McCreery

OXFORD FORUM



www.celiagreen.com

THE ABOLITION OF GENIUS

© 2012 Charles McCreery

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

ISBN-13: 978-0-953677-26-9

THE ABOLITION OF GENIUS

‘Every original worker in intellectual fields, every man who makes some new thing, is certain to arouse hostility where he does not meet with indifference [...] It is practically impossible to estimate the amount of persecution to which this group of pre-eminent British persons has been subjected, for it has shown itself in innumerable forms, and varies between a mere passive refusal to have anything whatever to do with them or their work and the active infliction of physical torture and death.’

Havelock Ellis, *A Study of British Genius*

About Oxford Forum

Oxford Forum is a research organization which was set up to oppose increasing ideological bias in mainstream academia. Its aim is to expand into an independent college cum university which would generate and publish research in several areas including philosophy, economics, the psychology and physiology of perception, and theoretical physics.

The Director of Oxford Forum, Dr Celia Green, has been at various times Senior Open Scholar at Somerville College, Oxford, and holder of a Perrott Warrick Studentship from Trinity College, Cambridge. She was awarded her doctorate by Oxford University for work on causation and the mind-body problem. She is the author of nine books, among them *The Human Evasion*, *The Decline and Fall of Science*, and *Advice to Clever Children*. She is currently Honorary Research Fellow at the Department of Philosophy, Liverpool University.

Oxford Forum is actively seeking potential patrons to provide funding for its activities. We are also looking for additional associates to help with our expansion plans.

To put Oxford Forum into context there follow two extracts from Celia Green's book, *The Lost Cause*. The first is by Dr Green herself, and is taken from the Preface. The second consists of a testimonial provided by Dr McCreery, which will also serve to provide some context for the present book.

Other endorsements for Dr Green's work were provided by the late Professor Hans Eysenck, and Professors Harry Hunt and Howard Robinson. These are reproduced in an Appendix to the present book.

If you are interested in working in association with us, or in becoming a financial supporter, please contact us. Further information can be found at www.celiagreen.com.

From *The Lost Cause: Causation and the Mind-Body Problem*

There appears to be an underlying belief in the modern world that if you are not in some socially recognised position or category, you cannot be deserving of any help, especially money, to get into a different position or category; and even if you fit into some category, no individual should consider it their business to help you, because you *should* be able to get help from some recognised source of funding for the social category into which you fit. I have to say very explicitly that I do not accept this, and am making a direct appeal for financial support to any institution which is able to provide it, as well as to any university or source of funding for universities.

Also I am appealing to any individual, who considers himself tolerably provided for, to recognise the fact that I am not, and that I am only being prevented from contributing to the intellectual life of my time by lack of salary or financial support.

Despite appearances we (I and my associates) are actually an independent university – with an associated publishing company – prevented from appearing as such by a severe lack of funding. We aim to maintain the academic standards which modern 'universities' have allowed to deteriorate, as their primary purpose has become the support and promotion of a particular ideology.

Oxford Forum is still totally unfunded and understaffed, although my colleagues and I are attempting to support it by means of entrepreneurial activities. The smallness of our scale of operation at present is caused only by the lack of both money and manpower, which we are attempting to overcome as fast as resources permit. We are entirely self-supporting, which severely curtails our activities.

This is also an appeal to individuals to come and work with us in some of the many capacities which are needed, in spite of our lack of social status as an academic institution.

We are also appealing for people who are prepared to act as genuine supporters in presenting our need of support to other people who might be able to provide it. There is not the slightest use in our making applications on our own behalf without such support. This I have concluded as a result of extensive experience, and it was confirmed by a fund-raising consultant with whom we once discussed it.

Celia Green

November 1, 2002

For some years now I have been working on a book, *The Abolition of Genius*, which analyses the relationship between genius and money, and in particular the facilitating effect on geniuses of the past of a private income, whether their own, as in the case of Wordsworth, Locke, Nietzsche, Newton and many others, or someone else's, as in the case of Coleridge, Wagner and Tchaikovsky, to mention but a few. I sometimes wonder how I would answer if asked what I consider qualifies me to write on such a topic, apart from the fact that psychology is my subject, and I imagine answering that I am particularly well qualified to write about it as I have worked with a genius professionally for over thirty years.

The concept of genius is an elusive one. We all think we know what it means, and can use it successfully in everyday conversation, but to define it successfully is more difficult, perhaps in part because we as yet have no idea of the possible brain mechanisms or modes of functioning which may underlie it. However, I think it is possible to analyse certain elements of the concept, of which I would mention two: the first is that genius implies a certain discontinuity, or qualitative difference, between the functioning of a genius and that of the rest of the population, at least in the genius's sphere of intellectual or artistic operation. The second relates more to our perception of genius, namely that genius is something that evokes astonishment in us when we contemplate it, and appears impossible of explanation.

I think Celia Green illustrates both of these aspects very well. Indeed, granted that there are some who would question whether the concept has any useful meaning outside the sphere of popular discourse, and who do not believe in this or any other discontinuity between one subsection of the human population and the rest, I would

say that if the concept has any meaning, she would have to be accounted a paradigm example.

I realise that for many people a statement of this kind can only be validated by the agreement of a large number of other people, or if not of a large number, then of a suitable number of socially recognised experts in the relevant field. I do not accept this criterion. Perhaps slightly less irrelevant is to ask what evidence of an objective kind I would offer in support of the statement. I would consider my judgement had validity even if the only evidence I had was of a non-public kind, but as it happens I am quite happy to point to a published body of work in support of it, namely the aphorisms in her books *The Decline and Fall of Science* and *Advice to Clever Children*. I may say that I consider the literary achievement they represent all the more remarkable for the fact that Dr Green's main areas of interest are theoretical physics and philosophy (in the literal, not the academic meaning) rather than literature per se.

As Celia Green's history well illustrates, exceptional individuals evoke exceptional hostility. In addition, exceptional individuals may require exceptional conditions of life in order to function well, or even at all. Baudelaire's poem *The Albatross* seems to express this idea in symbolic form: the bird is king of the air but helpless on board the deck of a ship.

The implications of all the above considerations are clear: Dr Green needs, and should have, significant financial support of the kind she describes in her preface in order to fulfil her potential. Let us hope that as a result of this book it will at last be forthcoming.

Charles McCreery D.Phil.
Formerly Lecturer in Experimental Psychology,
Magdalen College, Oxford.

Contents

Foreword by H.J. Eysenck

1. The Exceptional Individual in Primitive Societies 17
2. The Psychology of Thinking 25
3. The Advantages of Having Servants 32
4. The Family and Division of Labour 35
5. Universities 38
6. Qualifications and the Hereditary Principle 44
7. Training and Genius 50
8. Rentiers, Salary-Earners and Self-Made Millionaires 59
9. Salaries, Perks, and Private Incomes 66
10. Patronage by Committees 70
11. Grants of Capital and Grants of Income 76
12. The Redistribution of Wealth 79
13. Different Kinds of Capital 84
14. Human Rights and Private Property - I 89
15. Human Rights and Private Property – II 94
16. Human Rights and Private Property – III 99
17. Genius and Suffering – I 103
18. Genius and Suffering – II 108
19. Genius and Suffering – III 113
20. The Hubris of the Collective 119
21. Conclusion 122

Foreword¹

This is a courageous, well-argued and timely book, taking up the cudgels on behalf of the highly-gifted and original artist or scientist, against the tide of socialist egalitarianism which is threatening to bury all such originality and creativity in an ever-increasing number of committees. The problem of how to allow genius to flourish has always been with us, and in the past it has been solved by princely benevolence or inherited wealth. Both these sources have practically ceased to exist, and nothing has really come to take their place in a satisfactory manner.

We do, it is true, have science research councils, peer reviews of research applications, and other democratic bits and pieces that may, to the outsider, seem quite satisfactory. Only insiders know the difficulties that attend peer review, and the unlikely successful outcome that attends the application of truly original scientists or artists, or those who in some way are opposed, however rightly, to current orthodoxies.

McCreery, in a breezy and readable style, states the problem; it is more difficult to think of a solution. If we abandon peer review, are we not likely to be left to the mercies of random choice between different research proposals or artistic creations? McCreery has put the finger on a very real problem; it is difficult to see an answer to it emerging in the near future.

However, let us not be churlish and chastise the writer for not solving a problem which has baffled everyone who has seriously come to grips with it. Let us rejoice instead that he has had the courage to raise problems, which the great majority of scientists and artists, and particularly politicians and ordinary people in general, have resolutely refused to face at all. I hope the book will be widely read and that its message will penetrate to those responsible for the policies which at the moment threaten the abolition of genius. We should all be concerned with the premature crystallisation of spurious orthodoxies, whether in science or in art; in previous centuries, genius could triumph over the restrictions imposed by these 'orthodoxies', but this is getting more and more difficult. McCreery's *cri de coeur* should be heard widely, and reacted to positively. It may be later than you think!

H.J. Eysenck, Ph.D., D.Sc.,
Institute of Psychiatry
University of London

¹ The first draft of this book was written in the late 1970s, and Professor Eysenck kindly provided this Foreword shortly thereafter. The fact that the book has taken thirty years to appear for the first time, and that Professor Eysenck's Foreword consequently has to appear posthumously, illustrates, in my opinion, the power of economic, as opposed to legal, censorship, a topic which is discussed in Chapters XIV and XV. C.McC.

I

The Exceptional Individual in Primitive Societies

The chimera of self-sufficiency

It is an unfortunate fact of life on this planet that a single individual finds it hard to secure the necessities of life without any contribution from other people. There may be cases of isolated individuals providing themselves with food, clothing and shelter in the wilderness with the help of nothing more than an axe and a gun. But they have presumably found it a time-consuming occupation; and if they have made a notable contribution to culture it is only incidentally, as examples of heroic fortitude and resourcefulness.

Henry David Thoreau wrote a philosophical book¹ while living on his own in a hut in the woods, but he was at least partly dependent on a free market for agricultural produce, which clearly requires the implicit co-operation of other people. He grew more beans than he needed in order to sell some and purchase other necessities.

There are reputed to be tropical islands where one has no need of clothes and the food falls off the trees. But it is interesting to note that the highest achievements of civilisation have not occurred in such places.

Nowadays self-sufficiency is no longer the pursuit of a few individuals like H. D. Thoreau; it has become a movement. I was once sent a publisher's catalogue which seemed to consist almost entirely of books aimed at people wishing to emulate Thoreau. "The best alternative (to

¹ *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, Collier Books, New York, 1962.

modern technology),’ wrote the President of this publishing company, ‘is personal independence, created by building a society where people form their own day-to-day security by doing more for themselves.’

Unfortunately, the more a person does for himself the less likely he is to do anything requiring sustained and uninterrupted thought. Perhaps that is why the cult of self-sufficiency is smiled on by modern society, and regarded as idealistic even by those who prefer not to practise it themselves.

Of course there is another sort of self-sufficiency. This consists of having a private income so that you are not dependent on other people for providing you with work or buying the goods and services you are able to provide. This is not regarded as idealistic; in fact to advocate the acquisition of a private income is a heresy, and the few remaining people who actually have one have to be very apologetic about the fact if they wish to be considered idealistic at all.

The collective’s control over the individual

It is easy to imagine that before it had acquired much in the way of technology the human race made good use of an isolated person’s dependence on the collective to suppress individual initiative and imagination. The attitude that the collective knows best how the individual should usefully employ his time, coupled with the fact that it is in a position to apply potent sanctions if the individual fails to fall into line (‘no food for you today if you do not help us to catch it’) may be one of the reasons why technologically primitive societies can be so stable, that is, remain in a primitive state for thousands or even tens of thousands of years.

Of course, there may be other factors at work as well. For example, it is hard to imagine that the attitude ‘if God had intended man to fly

he would have given him wings’ was invented by the Victorians. It is easier to believe that the collective has always had a tendency to regard novelties resulting from individual initiative and imagination as impious.

Let us suppose that an imaginary individual from a primitive society which has not yet discovered the secret of generating fire manages to get sufficient time to himself to rub two sticks together until he produces a flame. He announces his discovery to his social group, perhaps imagining that they will be pleased at the extra degree of individual autonomy that will be conferred on each of them by his technique. But let us suppose his group already has a large communal bonfire, first started by taking advantage of some local fire started by lightning. To ensure that this bonfire remains large enough never to be in danger of going out, *collective* efforts of wood-gathering and fire-stoking have to be carried out, organised by *agents of the collective*. This communal bonfire is so important to the well-being of the group, and the origins of the lightning are so mysterious, that these agents of the collective form a special priestly caste. Enter our un-statusful individual who has discovered the secret of fire-lighting by friction (he does not belong to the statusful priestly caste because its ritualistic duties are so onerous they leave the caste’s members no time for carrying out original research). He announces his discovery. Do we think that the priestly agents of the collective are overjoyed to find that their social role is now redundant, their privileges purely historical and traditional, and their power over individual members of the group greatly reduced? Or do we think that they convene a hasty committee meeting, and denounce the innovating individual as a heretic who has meddled with the divine forces of nature and who deserves to be suitably punished?

The devaluation of Western culture

The evident disparity between the level of technology of groups of the human race in different parts of the globe appears to be something of an embarrassment to the modern mind. Its way out of the difficulty seems to be to devalue the achievements of European culture. 'What if Europe was the only part of the world to develop a scientifically based culture? We do not regard these things as important. If other groups of human beings failed to develop and implement such ideas this only shows that they had a true appreciation of their relative unimportance. They cultivated important *human* values instead and in that respect their achievements are as great as ours.' This is an unchallengeable assertion whatever rare and surprising practices a human group goes in for, because there is no indisputable standard for assessing the relative merit of different social practices as there is for comparing different levels of scientific or technological advance. If I happen not to have a taste for human sacrifice this can always be attributed to a purely subjective preference on my part and a failure to appreciate one of the finer things in life. Even if I refer to an abstract principle about the violation of the will of an individual, my setting any store by such a principle can always in the last resort be described as an invincible prejudice.

Families and individual autonomy

It seems possible that the non-appearance of technology in certain parts of the world may be at least partly due to the educational practices of the societies in those places. It seems that families in non-technological societies often do not enjoy a high degree of privacy and autonomy in relation to the collective. So aberrant parents who permit the wrong

sort of behaviour in their exceptional offspring may be quickly identified and brought to heel.

By contrast there were in Europe, at least until quite recently, isolated households in which aberrant practices were tolerated, such as the writing of symphonies by teenage boys, or the learning of Greek by children who had never seen a playgroup.

Perhaps that was one of the motives behind the drive for universal and compulsory state education in Europe — a system of education, in fact, more closely approximating to the model provided by primitive societies: the sooner all children are brought under the scrutiny of the state in state-financed crèches and the like, the sooner all unsupervised anomalies can be rooted out.

Making heavy weather of earning a living

Inevitably, as the technology of a society advances, the proportion of the population involved in producing the basic necessities of life such as food, clothing and shelter tends to become smaller. This poses a problem for the collective; it can no longer pretend that no individual within the group can dispose of his own time as he thinks fit since all are needed for hunting, etc.

Fortunately for collectivism 'a basic necessity of life' is a somewhat relative concept. The Fuegians observed by Darwin managed without much clothing despite the harshness of their climate; while the clothed Europeans shivered close to their camp-fire the almost naked Fuegians perspired some distance off. Moreover, as is frequently remarked, with increasing technological sophistication a society tends to regard as necessities what it formerly regarded as luxuries. This helps the collective to foster the illusion that the great mass of the population still needs to work — preferably at something prescribed by the collective.

The problem is still not entirely disposed of, however, since advances in technology are constantly tending to reduce the number of people required to produce even the erstwhile luxuries of life. It might be thought, therefore, that the human race would welcome any phenomenon, such as the accumulation of private capital, which reduced the proportion of the population who were born in need of a job. Evidently such is not the case, since for nearly a century western civilisation has been attempting to erode, either overtly by taxation or covertly through inflation, the capital that has been built up in private hands.

It is interesting how closely even the most advanced technological societies are coming to resemble non-technological ones with regard to the question of work. In western countries at the present time a smaller proportion of the population than ever before is required for producing such basic necessities of life as food, clothing and shelter. At the same time an increasingly small proportion of the population is really freed from want, in the sense of not having to think about earning a living to provide themselves with the next meal. In a non-technological society every individual member is liable to be compelled to engage in procuring for himself and others the necessities of life on the grounds that only in this way can the tribe survive. In a modern society this pretence is no longer possible; yet we find that with the destruction of private incomes a larger and larger proportion of the population is compelled to earn a living - that is, to find some activity that the collective, or at least one other person other than oneself, is prepared to recognize as being of value and reward accordingly.

The person who is obliged to earn a living in a modern society is not in a very different position from a member of a non-technological society who is obliged to join the rest of the tribe in their fishing activities before he is allowed to eat any of the catch. In the case of the

primitive tribe we may say that the individual is obliged to make some contribution that the collective will regard as useful in order to secure his own subsistence. In modern communist states the same principle was explicit. For example, in the Soviet era the Russian constitution stated that every individual must work. At the same time, since the state was the sole employer, this meant that only the collective had the power to decide what constituted useful employment.

The problem with this arrangement is that the collective is apt to have a rather unimaginative idea of what constitutes work. I once read of a communist army that had a very simple criterion for deciding which of the prisoners it took were workers and which were not: they looked at the prisoners' hands and saw whether they had callouses on them. Those prisoners lucky enough to have callouses survived, the rest were shot.

On the other hand the exceptional individual is liable to have rather unorthodox ideas in this area. Proust to all outward appearance lived a life of idleness for many years. However, he maintained throughout that he was preparing to write a great novel, and in view of the content of his eventual books it could be argued that the years of frequenting salons and living off his private income were a necessary part of the work of producing them. At the time, however, it is unlikely that the collective-at-large would have admitted that what he was doing was in any sense of the word 'work'; in fact even among his friends there were apparently some who would not have been willing to stake much money on his ever starting the proposed novel.

Shelley's idea of work was reading classical literature in the original Greek and Latin. Wordsworth's idea of work was studying the German philosopher Kant. Can we be sure that the Workers' Revolutionary Council (Grasmere Branch) would have approved of Brother Wordsworth's activity (or lack of it)? 'Brothers, for our

Brother Wordsworth, in recognition of his heroic feat of reading the Critique of Pure Reason from end to end, I propose the honour of Hero of British Labour. All in favour say “Aye”.’ ... ‘Brothers, thank you for the honour you have bestowed on me. But I was sustained in my great labour by the thought of your fraternal good wishes as you toiled in the fields helping to provide me with my People’s Poet grant. In fact, I have composed a little poem called ‘The Reaper’ expressing my true revolutionary appreciation of the dignity of manual labour ...’

II

The Psychology of Thinking

Freedom from daily chores

Let us consider the case of a group of people, say the occupants of a crashed aeroplane, who are suddenly marooned on an uninhabited island. Let us suppose that it is a relatively large group, perhaps a hundred people, and they decide to elect a leader to organise their activities, or a natural leader emerges, such as the chief pilot of the crashed plane. If they wish to survive, and escape or be rescued, they will not require the captain to do his ‘fair share’ of the scouting, hunting, foraging, cooking, shelter-building, wireless-signalling, boat-building and whatever other practical activities may be called for in their situation. His job will be to collate the information brought in by his scouts, work out who among his crew or passengers would be best at boat-building or foraging, think up plans for escape, etc. He will do this job best if his mind is kept free from the personal struggle for survival and the other people provide for his immediate physical wants. He will not indulge in physical activity himself except perhaps as a recreation or as an occasional inspiration to those who are doing the physical operations.

Similarly, although one of the functions of an army in wartime may be said to consist of shooting at the enemy, you do not expect the general to carry a gun (except perhaps for symbolic or ceremonial reasons). His function is to consider the reports and advice brought to him by his officers, and to plan the battle in the light of his experience. He will presumably do this best if he keeps his mind free and does not take part in the shooting himself.

A similar argument, among others, could be advanced for providing generals with batmen who will look after their physical needs, and for not expecting them to press their own trousers before a battle.

There is a film called *Angels One-Five* about an air-field during the Battle of Britain. In the middle of a German raid on the air-field the commander, played by Jack Hawkins, finds himself next to a Lewis gun while a German aeroplane is flying overhead. In a moment of enthusiasm he seizes the gun himself and lets fly at the passing raider. Later he is seen criticizing himself to a junior officer on the grounds that he 'let his personal feelings get the better of his service training.' 'Every man and woman on this station has a part to play', he says, and he evidently regards his seizing of the Lewis gun and 'pooping off at the Jerry planes' as incompatible with his responsibilities as a commanding officer.

The examples just given provide an analogy with original thinking. Both survival situations and military battles are examples of situations in which training is not enough; to be successful in them requires a modicum of 'inspiration' - of improvisation and rapid adaptation to unexpected or changing conditions.

Freedom from earning a living

I have noticed that when one suggests that great contributions to culture are not likely to be made in the spare time from earning a living people are often keen to produce some putative counter-example. For instance they may say, as an academic once said to me in conversation: 'But look at Einstein, he made up the theory of relativity while working in a patent office', as if this was sufficient to justify a society in which

anyone who fails to gain social approval is forced to pursue his trains of thought at night and after a hard day at the office.

As a matter of fact the example of Einstein's period at the Swiss Patent Office is far from apt. By his own account he found the strain of working in the office by day and thinking at night so great that it undermined his health. Furthermore, his case provides an illustration of the fact that it is not possible to switch off lines of thought that really interest one at nine in the morning and switch them on again at five in the afternoon. Einstein used to continue his thinking during office hours and hide his calculations in his desk when his supervisor came past. Einstein claimed that years later, long after he had become a social success, he had not been able to rid himself of a feeling of guilt at having carried on his work in his employer's time.²

Even if there are isolated cases of men of genius producing great works of art or contributions to knowledge while earning a living at something quite irrelevant to their main interest, this does not prove that every genius would be capable of it. So a society that forces everyone to earn a living will be exercising a highly selective influence on who becomes known as a genius, or even on the sort of works they produce. Indeed, it is interesting to speculate whether Einstein's ability to continue his work in theoretical physics despite working in the patent office may be related to his ability to produce a theory that appeals to the modern physicist who wants not to think.³

2 Banesh Hoffman, *Albert Einstein, Creator and Rebel*, Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, London, 1973, p.39.

3 Cf. Celia Green, *The Decline and Fall of Science*, Hamish Hamilton, 1977, Chapter 6: 'The Decline and Fall of Physics', and Celia Green, *The Human Evasion*, Hamish Hamilton, 1969, Chapter X, 'The Science of Evasion.'

How thinking is done

Whether it is that original thinking is so rare, or because the human race has a vested interest in being obtuse about it, the fact remains that even educated people sometimes betray a remarkable ignorance of how it is done. The nineteenth-century English philosopher Herbert Spencer describes two examples of this in his autobiography.⁴ When he first met George Eliot, the novelist, she professed amazement that he did not have a wrinkled brow, considering the amount of thought that must have gone into his books. On another occasion a man expressed surprise at seeing Spencer playing billiards in the Athenaeum, considering this an unphilosophical activity.

In fact, Spencer, like Mozart, was an enthusiastic billiard-player, and his daily visits to the Athenaeum at this time in his life, for reading and intellectual conversation with friends, as well as for billiards, may well have been contributing as directly to his intellectual output as any more conscious periods of thought at home.

An original thinker may well go in for apparently extraneous and incongruous activities as a necessary adjunct to his intellectual pursuits. At one stage in his life Herbert Spencer dictated a book in ten minute stretches in between longer bouts of squash during which his amanuensis had to wait outside the court. At another time he dictated while rowing a boat on the Serpentine, his amanuensis sitting in the stern. He would row for ten minutes, dictate for five and so on.

The case of Herbert Spencer provides an illustration of the inadequacy of a purely quantitative approach to intellectual activities, which leaves out of consideration all psychological factors. One might

4 Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography, in Two Volumes*, D. Appleton and Co., New York, 1904.

be tempted to think that, if Spencer had rowed for five minutes each time and dictated for ten minutes instead of five, he would have been able to double his output. But in fact what happened whenever he tried to increase his productivity beyond a certain rate was that his health broke down and he stopped producing at all.

The financial cost of solitude

We shall see in a later chapter⁵ how Byron commented on the incompatibility of going about in the social world and cultivating a genius for poetry, and it is interesting to note that philosophers too have sometimes gone to considerable lengths to remove themselves from normal society. The social isolation of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche after leaving their respective university positions are well known, and were perhaps not entirely of their own choosing. What are more interesting from our present point of view are those cases of apparently more gregarious philosophers who at certain times in their lives deliberately cut themselves off from normal society in the interest of their work. I am thinking particularly of Descartes and Hume. At one time as a young man Descartes seems to have 'disappeared' from normal society and started living *incognito* in Paris; apparently even his family did not know where he was until one of Descartes' servants bumped into a relative of Descartes in the street and gave away his whereabouts. Similarly Hume, at a similar stage in his life, went to France and located himself in the countryside, where he knew no one and where his only intellectual company was the local priest, in order to write his *Treatise*.

Hume, it should be noted, seems on occasion to have used the incompatibility of normal social intercourse and the philosophical

5 See below, p. ??

perspective to *dispel* the latter. The following is the passage in which he describes this process:

I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environed with the deepest darkness, and utterly deprived of the use of every member and faculty.

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, Nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when, after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any further.⁶

Let me add that the peculiar conditions of life required by Descartes, Hume and Spencer at various times in their respective careers were achieved in each case thanks to an inherited private income.

The necessity of private incomes

In her book *An Anatomy of Inspiration*⁷, Rosamund Harding discusses in great detail the various methods by which geniuses of the past have cultivated inspiration, and the conditions they found necessary for creative work. However, it may be significant that nowhere in

6 David Hume, *A Treatise Concerning Human Nature*, Part IV, Chapter VII, reproduced in A.J. Ayer & R. Winch (Eds.), *British Empirical Philosophers*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952, pp. 496–7.

7 Op. cit.

this book does the author discuss how geniuses have procured these conditions for themselves in the face of a disinterested or even hostile population.

People appear to have an emotional resistance to discussing the financial affairs of men of genius of the past. Those few individuals who do happen to know about the finances of some exceptional person often seem to be reluctant to pass the information on to others in a readily graspable form, or at any rate to discuss its significance. For example, an academic biographer of the philosopher John Locke devotes 482 pages to his life and work but only a single paragraph of seven lines to the fact that he had a private income. He mentions that when Locke was 28 his father died and left him some land and a few cottages which 'brought Locke a fair income for the rest of his life.'⁸ One might infer from the modest length of this passage that Locke's private income was of relatively little significance in his life. However, Locke evidently thought otherwise, since his biographer reveals that the philosopher 'was often agitated by some failure or delay in the receipt of his rents. He was not the most patient of landlords, and he had always a sharp eye on his money.' (Ibid.)

This reticence on the part of biographers and other intellectual writers with regard to the private finances of men and women of genius, and in particular the crucial role of private incomes in their productivity, is something we will attempt to remedy in this book.

8 Maurice Cranston, *John Locke, A Biography*, Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1957, p. 70.

III

The Advantages of Having Servants**In service to genius**

The question of whether the human race as a whole has any desire for culture could well be considered in relation to the current attitude to the idea of domestic service. I do not see that there is anything very *recherché* about the idea that servants are desirable to help a genius in his or her work. However, I wonder how many of today's school-teachers have ever said anything like the following to their pupils:

'Domestic servants are the *sine qua non* of civilization. We may not all be geniuses. But if you happen not to be a genius yourself there is no higher calling than to help someone who is. There is no more effective way of giving your push to the advancement of culture than to seek out an exceptional individual and render him or her whatever assistance you can in their struggle with the physical environment. What could be better for one's morale than to be in the lucky position of having found one, and to think that you are one of the mainsprings on which civilization depends?'

It is one of the myths of our time that in the past it was only a tiny minority, the very rich, who had servants. This is a comforting myth because the very rich are the subject of odium, they constitute a small percentage of the population, and it is supposed (if it is considered at all) that as a class they have produced no more than their fair statistical share of geniuses; so if they have been deprived of servants no great harm has been done.

In fact, of course, something like the reverse of the myth was true. It was not just the very rich who had servants; it was only the

very poor who did not. Among those who did have them were poets, painters, musicians, scientists and philosophers; in fact geniuses of every description. This fact does not receive the same attention as the number of servants employed by the rich, so the harm that may have been done by depriving the class of exceptional people of domestic servants goes undiscussed.

It may be that people were formerly more ready to consider the relevance to a genius's intellectual output of his domestic arrangements in general, and of the availability of servants in particular. The following is a passage from a biography of Chopin first published in 1946:

'Those who have been so quick to denounce George Sand as the evil genius of Chopin's life would do well, before listening to the malicious gossip of those friends who never moved a finger to help the ailing man, to consider what he actually owed to her. His debt, and consequently that of the world of music, may be summarized thus:

From 1839 to 1845 he enjoyed complete exemption from material worries. His daily life was organized for him, leaving him free devote himself to his pleasures and his art. At Nohant he had the best and sunniest room and was waited on hand and foot; he was never pressed to do what did not appeal to him. Think of Wagner's titanic struggle to win this freedom from care! Yet Chopin had it all without having to ask.'⁹

The benefit to servants of having servants

In fact there was a time when in relatively large households even some of the servants had servants. I once heard on the radio an elderly lady describing her childhood in a stately home. She remarked that her

⁹ Arthur Hedley, *Chopin*, Dent, London, 1947, p. 87.

parents' head gardener used to have more servants than she herself had now.

Who is to say that the head gardener was not more likely to make a significant contribution to the art and science of horticulture for having his material wants looked after by a number of servants so that he could devote all his attention to gardening? It may even be the case that the feeling of significance aroused in him by being waited on as if he was important made him more likely to make some original contribution to the art or science of horticulture.

There is a story about a Duke whose expenditure was exceeding his income. An expert was called in to advise. Among other facts the expert discovered that the Duke employed one cook whose sole function was to prepare biscuits every day for the Duke to eat with his sherry before dinner. The expert recommended as one of his economy measures that this cook should be sacked. The Duke is said to have replied to the effect, 'Dammit, can't a fellow even enjoy a decent biscuit with his sherry these days?'

This story is always told as if it only served to illustrate the extravagant standard of living of old-style Dukes. What is not pointed out is that the biscuit-cook was probably very good at making biscuits, and that this may have had something to do with the fact that he could devote his whole life to this particular branch of the culinary art.

IV

The Family and Division of Labour

The collective versus the family

There remains one context in which an individual is still willing to act as cook, cleaner, shopper, housekeeper and general factotum for another, and that is the family. It may be argued that middle-class women have been compelled to become domestic servants to their husbands and offspring because they are unable to hire anyone else.¹⁰ But whatever the reason, the fact remains that in certain households the husband and the children still enjoy some of the freedom from material considerations that can arise from having a servant. To the extent that the husband is forced to earn a living this advantage is largely negated, but there remain the children who may be having their beds made and their meals provided without their having to take thought for the matter. What is more, if they are of an intellectual disposition, they may be benefiting from being at an age at which society pretends to sanction the idea of learning.

Clearly this is a situation fraught with possibilities. At the very least, the child may acquire a feeling for the advantages of a situation in which he has the maximum of intellectual interests in life and the minimum of material distractions, and he may attempt to reproduce such conditions in later life. Of such things may original intellectual achievements spring.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why society feels it will be safer when all education is firmly in the hands of the state. Then it can be

¹⁰ Cf. Celia Green, *The Decline and Fall of Science*, *op.cit.*, pp. 21-22.

sure that the right number of educational counsellors and behaviour therapists will always be on hand to distract the child's attention from such taboo areas as the benefits of domestic help or the excitement of learning things fast.

This may be one reason why communism tended to be suspicious of, not to say overtly hostile to, the family unit. We may see the family, at least the old-fashioned kind, as a microcosm of a civilised society: there was a certain amount of division of labour or specialisation of function; one of the parents was the provider of wealth, the other the provider of household services, while the offspring devoted themselves to learning things. The so-called nuclear family is admittedly a relatively small and inefficient social group for freeing an individual's mind for purely intellectual work compared with some that might be imagined, but already it illustrates how a voluntary division of labour among a group of individuals might lead to one of the individuals in the group thinking his or her own thoughts.

From the collectivist's point of view one of the things that are wrong with the family is that the division of labour comes about by mutual agreement, at least of an implicit kind, between the individual members. The collective has no part in it, and therefore cannot guarantee that the division will not occur in such a way as to favour the member most given to independent thought. There was specialisation of function within a modern communist society, of course, but the state was much more in control of it. Its ultimate weapon was known as 'direction of labour'; in other words, the collective could tell the individual where and how to earn his daily bread.

How to obstruct a future David Hume

We should also bear in mind the occasional instance in which families have supported a relative in adult life, despite society not giving any endorsement to this process. When Hume published the first two Books of his *Treatise* at the age of 27, 'I thought', he said, 'it would contribute very much to my Tranquillity, and might spare me many Mortifications, to be in the Countrey, while the Success of the Work was doubtful,' Accordingly, 'I... immediately went down to my Mother and my Brother, who lived at his Countrey house and was employing himself, very judiciously and successfully, in the Improvement of his Fortune.'¹¹ He was evidently a very undesirable character, this elder brother of Hume's; not only had he inherited a family property but entirely on his own initiative and without the say-so of a single committee he was engaged in pioneering the introduction of modern farming methods into Scotland. As it turned out it was just as well that Hume had an agreeable home to retreat to, as the *Treatise* certainly did not bring him instant social recognition and a more adequate fortune. Eighteen years later the remnants of the first edition of 1,000 copies were 'still cluttering up the publisher's shelves', as his biographer puts it, and Hume never lived to see a second, such was society's eagerness for new philosophical insights. However, far from being forced to earn his living as a result of his failure, Hume writes that he 'prosecuted with great Ardour my Studies in the Countrey.'¹²

Evidently there was something seriously wrong with the structure of society when, despite a social reverse, an intellectual could devote himself hedonistically to the activity he liked best.

¹¹ E.C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, Nelson, 1954, pp.117 & 133.

¹² Ibid.

V Universities

Private incomes and independence of thought

In this chapter we shall consider the question of whether universities might serve as a haven for geniuses, and indeed whether they have ever done so in the past.

At present, universities appear to have a monopoly of the pursuit of knowledge, particularly in the fields of science and philosophy. However, as recently as the late nineteenth century Lord Rayleigh, the discoverer of argon, pursued his researches in a laboratory at his own house, Terling Place in Essex.

Indeed, prior to the twentieth century nearly all the most significant contributions to philosophy, and many of the most notable advances in science, were made by individuals who were working outside universities.

In the case of science the explanation is usually put forward that, in Great Britain at least, the universities did not teach science at all until towards the end of the nineteenth century. However, perhaps that fact itself is not particularly to their credit. Moreover, if philosophy has been taught in universities for so much longer than science, this makes it all the more remarkable that so few original philosophers have been dons.

Several of the most famous philosophers, such as Descartes and Schopenhauer, inherited private incomes that were sufficient to support them, so in such cases the philosopher was at least not

compelled to take a university post in order to live, even if there might have been other inducements to do so. However, even the relatively impoverished Spinoza, who had earned his living by grinding lenses for a good part of his life, turned down the offer of the chair of philosophy in Heidelberg when it was offered to him in 1673. The following is part of his reply to the invitation, from which it will be seen that at least one of the reasons he gave was a desire not to jeopardise in any way his intellectual independence:

Honoured Sir: Had it ever been my wish to undertake the duties of a professor in any faculty, my desires would have been amply gratified in accepting the position which his Serene Highness the Prince Palatine does me the honour to offer me through you. The offer, too, is much enhanced in value in my eyes by the freedom of philosophizing attached to it.... But I do not know within what precise limits that the same liberty of philosophizing would have to be restrained, so that I would not seem to interfere with the established religion of the principality.... You see, therefore, honoured sir, that I do not look for any higher worldly position than that which I now enjoy; and that for love of the quiet which I think I cannot otherwise secure, I must abstain from entering upon the career of a public teacher...¹³

Perhaps the most celebrated philosopher to have earned a living from a university was Immanuel Kant. However, the story of Kant's relationship with his university (Königsberg) is not entirely to the credit of the latter. For a start, the university kept him out of a professorship for fifteen years, although he was extremely indigent as a young man and could have benefited from the extra money. Only at the third attempt, at the age of 46, did he finally obtain a professorship.

¹³ Epistle 54. Quoted in W. Durant, *Outlines of Philosophy: Plato to Russell*, Ernest Benn, London, 1962 edition, pp. 150—1.

It seems to have been a case of the university holding out as long as it decently could, because by that age Kant had established a reputation as writer and lecturer on 'mathematics, physics, logic, metaphysics, ethics, geography, anthropology and even military pyrotechnics and the science of fortification.'¹⁴

Then there is the episode in which Kant received a cabinet order from the Prussian King, saying: 'Our highest person has been greatly displeased to observe how you misuse your philosophy to undermine and destroy many of the most important and fundamental doctrines of the Holy Scriptures and of Christianity. We demand of you immediately an exact account, and expect that in future you will give no such cause of offence, but rather that, in accordance with your duty, you will employ your talents and authority so that our paternal purpose may be more and more attained. If you continue to oppose this order you may expect unpleasant consequences.'¹⁵

Kant, being virtually a public employee paid by the state, replied that although every scholar should have the right to form independent judgments on religious matters and to make his opinions known, he would nevertheless preserve silence during the reign of the present king.

Let us take another case, that of Nietzsche. He was a university professor at Basel for ten years; however, all his most significant work was done only after he had left the university. He seems to have regarded the time spent teaching as having merely delayed by ten years his starting on his life's task, and as having shattered his health.

14 E.W.F. Tomlin, *Great Philosophers of the West*, Arrow Books, London, 1959 edition, pp. 199—200.

15 Durant, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

After ten years working on his own, Nietzsche was so impoverished by having to publish his books at his own expense that he even considered the idea of taking another university post to recoup his fortunes - at least to the extent of writing to a former colleague to enquire about the possibility. The colleague assured him it was out of the question. Although the German-speaking universities had been ignoring Nietzsche's work for ten years, thereby helping to bring about the unsaleability of his books that had brought about his financial hardship, they evidently knew enough about their contents to know that they did not want him back.

Of course it may be doubted whether a return to a university post was really an attractive possibility for Nietzsche at that stage, even if the opening had been offered to him; nevertheless it might have been psychologically beneficial to him to have known that the option was there, even if he had no intention of making use of it.

Academics and private incomes

The example of Kant might be thought irrelevant on the grounds that Western academics are no longer victimised for not upholding Christianity. However, the principle that anyone in the employ of a collective entity does not have the security of someone who is privately funded still applies. One does not even have to produce in evidence for this assertion those cases in which academics have been sacked for holding unacceptable views on gender or race, for example. We can consider a subtler example, that of the physicist, Henry Cavendish.

Cavendish was not a don and did his experiments at home. He communicated with his servants by means of notes and forbade them to speak to him on pain of dismissal. Whether he did this because of his shyness or so as not to be distracted from his trains of thought, he

evidently considered it a necessary condition of his work. Now this was only possible because he had a private income and was paying for his servants himself. One wonders how long a don would remain in favour with his colleagues if he refused to speak with the college servants.

I realize that this illustration will excite no sympathy in many people; they will take it as a negative reflection on Cavendish rather than on the universities. They will probably think, 'You cannot expect a university to cater for such an outrageous taste in privacy. Fortunately the great majority of intellectuals do not make such extreme demands.' That is true. But then the great majority of intellectuals do not make important contributions to knowledge either.

What is shown by this hypothetical example and the reaction it would evoke in most people is the undesirability of an economic monopoly being vested in the collective, or any branch of it, including the universities. The great majority of human beings will always rate the displaying of the correct social attitudes above the unconditional pursuit of knowledge, and if there is ever a conflict between the two, as in the case of Cavendish, they will always support the individual who shows the correct attitudes in preference to the one who shows an unconditional predilection for facts.

If the reader has in mind an example of an academic who in his or her opinion has made a fundamental contribution to knowledge, have they considered the possibility that this person may have had a private income in addition to his academic salary? Newton, for example, was a don at Trinity College, Cambridge; however he was also the heir to, and later the owner of, some land in Lincolnshire. Kant saved hard out of his professorial salary and invested the proceeds at five to six per

cent with an English settler in Königsberg called Green, so that when he died he left the 'respectable' sum of over 21,000 thalers.¹⁶

Incidentally, the example of Kant illustrates why inflation is the enemy of independent thinking. It is only possible to save out of income, and thereby steadily increase one's independence of the collective, if there is a reasonably stable currency in which to save. A sufficiently rapid inflation makes it almost impossible for an intellectual gradually to improve his or her position in this way, unless they devote so much time, ingenuity, and emotional energy to the task that they have none of these commodities left for their real work. The same goes for a thinker who is fortunate enough already to have amassed a certain capital or inherited it: in a period of inflation he may only be able to preserve it if he is prepared to think so much about the problem of how to do so that he is unable to think about anything else.

¹⁶ Tomlin, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

VI

Qualifications and the Hereditary Principle**Selection by qualifications versus selection by patronage**

There is a certain irony in the socialist's objection to the hereditary principle. What he or she professes to find objectionable about it is that it gives preferment to people not on grounds of native ability but on the apparently irrelevant and accidental grounds of ancestry. However, as selection procedures become more and more 'democratic' what happens is not that people are selected purely on their ability to do the job; instead the privilege of birth is replaced by a new sort of privilege, that of having the right psychological attitudes.

The more those responsible for selecting people for advancement feel answerable to others for the suitability of their choice, the more likely it is that they will pick the 'safe' candidate, i.e. the one who will give offence to the least number of people by displaying the most acceptable psychology.

At first sight it might appear that the more and more widespread use of 'qualifications' as the criterion of advancement, rather than the question of who the candidate knows or what his ancestry is, would provide more opportunities for the really able individual. However, curiously enough the person of genius may actually suffer more under the modern 'democratic' system than he would have done under the old method of string-pulling by individuals.

Under the old, undemocratic system there was at least a sporting chance that the individual of genius might find the support of some rich, influential or aristocratic personage who would use his social leverage to advance the genius's career, even if the genius

happened to have no social leverage of his own, due to a lack of the right academic qualifications or an unprestigious social background. It is irrelevant what may have been the motives of the string-puller concerned. He may sometimes have had an economic motive for supporting the able man; perhaps this was part of the reason for the sixth Duke of Devonshire helping Paxton — a desire to increase the value of his estate. Alternatively, a patron may simply have wanted the cachet of having recognised and helped advance the career of a man of outstanding ability; maybe this idea entered the mind of Carl Wilhelm Ferdinand, Duke of Brunswick, who supported Gauss. Or the patron may even have had a moment of disinterested generosity and wished to see an able man given his chance, as may have been the case with Sir Isaac Barrow's recommendation of Newton for a professorship, or Professor Henslow's recommendation of Darwin as naturalist for the *Beagle*. Whatever the motive, in each case the effect on the man of genius was the same: he obtained an advantage, of which he was able to make good use, which he might not have obtained through his social background or his academic qualifications alone.

A point to notice about the new method of advancement by qualification is that it provides mean people with a cast-iron excuse for not promoting a manifestly able individual who happens not to have acquired the right passport from society. Once you have laid down 'objective' requirements for filling a given post, such as a given number of degrees, a certain quantity of 'training' or 'experience' and so on, those responsible for handing out society's favours can always say of the exceptional individual: 'He just did not have the right qualifications,' even if they suspect he is the best man for the job. Or perhaps I should say, especially if they suspect it.

The domination of committees

There is a socialist criticism of universities that became fashionable in the 1960s to the effect that they were insufficiently 'democratic'. What the collectivist appears to have against academics is not that they are elected by committees, but that the committees that elect them are not big enough.

As a matter of fact there was still some hope for the man of genius, albeit a very small one, while the collective bodies that brought about preferment in the academic world were rather notional and influence might really be concentrated in the hands of just one man. In those days Sir Joseph Barrow might recommend Isaac Newton for a professorship and get his way although the proposed candidate was only twenty-four. Humphrey Davy might take on a Michael Faraday as his research assistant although the latter had never been to a university.

Of course such happenings may always have been rare, and the Davy-Faraday case illustrates one reason why. Davy later fell out with Faraday because the erstwhile pupil began to disagree with his master on a point of scientific theory and the erstwhile pupil proved to be right. An illustrious academic who promotes a bright young man or woman obviously runs the risk that his protégé's lustre will eventually dim his own.

Clearly the likelihood of a professor giving way to an impulse of disinterested idealism or generosity may never have been very great. However, the modern collectivist evidently feels that it would be safer if the professor were kept out of temptation's way entirely. To this end it is desirable that he should not be master in his own house and that his thinking about who should be promoted should be conducted with a large number of people looking over his shoulder.

Genius and early academic performance

Another point to notice about the modern method of promotion by qualifications is that it puts a great premium on the individual of genius being able to function within the academic system early in life.

However, Havelock Ellis remarked that even among geniuses who have shown some sign of precocity there was a type which may 'show only average, and even much less than average, aptitude for ordinary school studies, but be at the same time engrossed in following up his own preferred lines of study or thinking . . .'¹⁷

Ellis characterised some of the individuals in this class as follows:

'The second group, comprising those children who are mostly indifferent to ordinary school learning but are absorbed in their own lines of thought, certainly contains a very large number of individuals destined to attain intellectual eminence. They by no means impress people by their "precocity"; Scott, occupied in building up romances, was a "dunce"; Hume, the youthful thinker, was described by his mother as "uncommon weak-minded". Yet the individuals of this group are often in reality far more "precocious", further advanced along the line of their future activities, than the children of the first group [those men of genius who showed an extraordinary aptitude for acquiring the ordinary subjects of school study]. It is true that they may be divided into two classes, those who from the first have divined the line of their later advance, and those who are only restlessly searching and exploring; but both alike have really entered on the path of their future progress.'¹⁸

17 Havelock Ellis, *A Study of British Genius*, Hurst and Blackett, London, 1904, p. 137.

18 Ibid., pp. 138-9.

Incidentally, I feel there is a curiously anachronistic flavour about this passage, with its implication that a genius might divine the line of his later advance entirely on his own, without the help of an agent of the collective such as a Careers Guidance Officer.

Ellis further considered that many of those men of genius whose biographers explicitly said they were not precocious, belonged in reality to this same group, viz. those who were already absorbed in their own lines of mental activity. He considered that many of them were 'really just as "precocious" as the other; thus Cardinal Wiseman as a boy was "dull and stupid, always reading and thinking"; Byron showed no aptitude for school work, but was absorbed in romance, and Landor, though not regarded as precocious, was already preparing for his future literary career.'¹⁹

We may imagine Byron's lack of success at school work, though it may have made large stretches of his life irksome and tedious at the time, did not cause him sleepless nights about his future career. With the prospect of a private income to sustain him in his chosen course regardless of whether that course brought him any earning power, no doubt he could afford to regard his lack of academic success with equanimity.

It is interesting to imagine how different his psychological position might have been under a socialist system, with no prospect of inheriting a private income or ever accumulating the capital to provide himself with one. In such a society one of the more congenial ways of earning a living for a literary person might seem to be that of becoming a university don, for which early academic success is more or less essential. Perhaps the collectivist will argue that Byron would just have buckled down to his school work and made a success of it once he

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 140-1.

realised that his future livelihood might depend on it. He would have realised that his literary destiny must wait, no matter how urgent its promptings might have seemed at the time.

Perhaps the collectivist should consider the possibility that the conflict between Byron's internal inclinations and his perception that his future viability might depend on his overruling them might have made him even less efficient at school work, not more so.

VII

Training and Genius

The nature of training

Along with the concept of qualifications, the concept of training has apparently acquired a growing importance in recent times.

The sort of training I have in mind is not the sort in which an athlete submits himself to a regime of exercise in order to increase his physical achievement, or in which horses are galloped to increase their speed and endurance, but the sort in which one individual is trained by another, preferably an agent of the collective, as in the phrase 'trained social worker', or 'trained physicist', or even 'trained philosopher'. The equestrian analogy for this sort of training might be that in which a horse is turned into a trained dressage animal.

It seems to me that among the characteristic overtones of this latter training concept are a degree of passivity, combined with a lack of critical attitude towards the trainer and the activity in question - or at the very least the temporary suppression of any critical attitude, if it exists, in the interests of pleasing the trainer.

I do not wish to belittle the intelligence of the horse, but I do not think it can be denied that the whole concept of dressage is largely the work of humans and horses indulge in this activity only at a human's behest. Plutarch has a story of a Roman elephant that practised its circus tricks at night because it was the least adroit performer among its troupe and wished to avoid further reproach and punishment. But this story, even if it were true, would owe its interest to being exceptional and somehow uncharacteristic of animal nature; and further-

more it would not alter the fact that it was a human that had initiated the idea of the animal performing tricks in the first place.

As regards the horse's attitude to the trainer and the activity of dressage in general, it is obvious that the animal will never be a great success if it is liable to be overcome by feelings of the futility of dressage in the middle of a test or even a training session. If ideas cross its mind about how much more appealing it would be to indulge in some other activity such as outrunning other horses it must suppress the desire to act on them. In fact one gathers quite a special sort of temperament is required for a horse to have the potential to become a champion dressage horse.

One might add that a horse would not get good marks if some equine equivalent of creative genius inspired it to make up new steps of its own in the middle of a prescribed test.

There is another component of the training concept we might mention; this is a sort of odour of propriety and decorum as regards the behaviour of the 'trained' one, an expectation that he or she will not commit social gaffes in their particular field, rather as one scarcely expects a dressage horse to kick up its heels in the middle of a test. For example, if a building falls down almost as soon as it is put up, people are liable to say, 'It is almost inconceivable that such a thing should happen; the man who designed it is a trained architect.'

This brings us to the effect that alleged training in a person seems to have on the outside observer. Not only does the successful passage through some socially approved course of training imply that the candidate has temporarily suspended any critical faculty he may possess with regard to the training activity as a whole; it also seems to induce in most observers a sort of numbing of their own critical capacity with regard to the subsequent activities of the trained person.

For example, let us suppose that someone with a physical ailment has come under the ministrations of a person who is the product of a socially approved training process, and the drugs prescribed by the trained one make the patient feel worse and not better. Does that patient readily come to the conclusion, ‘This individual is incompetent, there is no reason to think him any more intelligent than I am and every reason to think he knows less of my particular constitution than I do; I should discontinue the treatment immediately’? Even if he does think this, does he find a ready and sympathetic ear if he voices his conclusion to other people? Is it not more likely that they will say to him, ‘But So-and-So is a trained doctor, he must know best.’

Training and genius

It is interesting to note that the human race has not yet worked out a way of ascribing the achievements of genius to training. One might reasonably ascribe the competence of an orchestral player to his sound musical training at some collective institution such as a musical academy. But it might sound a bit forced to ascribe to such an academy the most characteristic achievements of a genius whose music he was playing, even if the composer had been to one. Thus, for example, it might sound a little unconvincing to ascribe the most characteristic musical achievements of Haydn to the fact that he was once a chorister at St. Stephen’s Cathedral choir school, or Schubert’s exceptionality to the fact that he was trained as a chorister at the Vienna *Hofkapelle*. For a start there were presumably a number of other individuals who had the presumed benefits of each of these types of training and who went in for composition without ever achieving comparable results.

Even in the field of musical execution people have not yet started to ascribe the achievements of the most exceptional performers of the

past to some peculiarity of their training. As far as I know no-one has yet tried to prove that Paganini was the most highly trained violinist who ever lived; although perhaps some ambitious young person who wishes to make a name for himself in the world should try.

Risk-taking and genius

We may also note that the mere avoidance of gaffes, due to a scrupulous sense of what is the socially approved thing in any given situation, is scarcely a defining characteristic of genius.

It is said that when Mendelssohn first asked the players of the Philharmonic in London to rehearse Schubert’s Ninth Symphony, some years after the composer’s death, they laughed when they came to the repeated four-note accompaniment figure in the last movement. Someone hearing this symphony for the first time might still think it an astonishing idea to find in a work of this kind; but now that Schubert is accepted by the collective as a socially accredited genius this figure is probably more often perceived as electrifying than ridiculous.

One might say that a tendency to audacity and risk-taking of various kinds is characteristic of genius. In the Schubert example the audacity perhaps consists of incorporating in the work something that is almost excessively naive or simple.

Turning to a different field, philosophy, it is possible to see an illustration of a similar kind of risk-taking in Descartes’s literary style. Descartes might have chosen to write his *Discourse* in Latin, which was the socially approved language for trained minds wishing to write about fundamental matters in the sixteenth century. He might have chosen to write, like Kant, in long sentences that occasionally seem to have lost their main verbs, with no examples to illustrate the conceptual discussion, and using a large number of technical terms that would only be familiar to people who had been through the same Jesuit

training as Descartes. Instead he chose to write in his native French, and in a simple, almost conversational style, as if writing down things that had just come into his head.

The risk in writing in a lucid manner is that one will immediately be understood. And in fact Descartes paid a certain price for being so perspicuous. His meaning was sufficiently obvious for intelligent contemporaries such as Hobbes immediately to seize on the weaknesses in Descartes's arguments, so that the 'Objections and Replies' that were appended to Descartes's works in his own lifetime already contained the criticisms of his philosophy that have remained the standard ones down to the present day.

It is an interesting fact, incidentally, that Descartes did his philosophising at his own expense, whereas Kant was an employee of the collective. Here is a fascinating field of research that is being neglected by the thesis-writers: the influence of financial dependence or independence on a philosopher's literary style. Thus a student might consider for his or her thesis subject whether the relative obscurity of Kant's prose style in *The Critique of Pure Reason* can fairly be said to have stood him in good stead when his job was in jeopardy for allegedly undermining the Christian faith. He might discuss whether there is any significance in the fact that another even more notable example of linguistic obscurity, Hegel, was also one of the few philosophers of note to have been employed by a university. He might then go on to analyse the differing literary styles of the British Empiricists and discuss whether the lucidity of Locke and Hume owes anything to the fact that they both had private incomes. He might even discuss the difference in style between Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and his later work, the *Philosophical Investigations*, and whether the fact that Wittgenstein had a private income and gave it away has any bearing on the evolution of his manner of writing.

However, perhaps no collective entity is likely to finance such a potentially revealing line of enquiry.

The trained manner

To revert to our Schubert and Descartes examples: what clarity and simplicity did for them, at least in the first instance, was to expose them to criticism and ridicule. Training, on the other hand, tends to protect people from these things.

First, as already mentioned, the fact that a person is supposed to be highly trained tends to disarm the critical faculties of those who deal with him or her. The supposition of training need not even be accurate; from time to time one reads in the newspapers of individuals who have posed as doctors and got away with it for considerable periods of time, apparently by virtue of having a convincing manner and being willing to claim qualifications they did not possess when applying for jobs, and despite the fact that the only medical expertise they had was such as can be obtained by a reasonably intelligent person from books and perhaps some time spent in a hospital as an orderly.

Secondly, training and social qualifications tend to give an individual access to a professional persona—a sort of 'character' which he shares with all the other people with the same training and qualifications, and behind which the individual can conceal any personal characteristics and idiosyncrasies which might give rise to ridicule. For example, many sorts of training give a person access to a professional jargon, and even an entire style of writing peculiar to the profession.

Thus trained theoretical physicists know that the thing to do in writing a professional paper is to use a maximum of mathematical symbolism and an absolute minimum of words linking the symbolism and explaining what concepts or trains of thought (if any) the symbolism

is about. Trained scientists in most fields will tend to write in an ostensibly 'objective', impersonal style, eschewing the use of the personal pronoun, and so on.

A genius, on the other hand, tends to reveal or expose his or her own personality in their work.

It is a truism that in music the work of the great composers tends to be immediately recognisable as their own and no-one else's. In the literary field, the genius's tendency to the personal and subjective can be observed even in such an ostensibly abstract and impersonal field as philosophy. Nothing could be more personal and subjective than Descartes's approach to a philosophical question: he writes about it as if he were writing a piece of psychological autobiography; his style is as unpretentious as that of someone buttonholing you with interesting anecdotes about his past from an armchair. Schopenhauer's 'single idea', the elaboration of which was the task of his main work, *The World as Will and Idea*, is an abstract and metaphysical one. Yet to read his book is to make contact with a distinct personality, as well as with a set of ideas.

Incidentally, Schopenhauer himself suggests that even a person of unexceptional intellect might achieve literary immortality if he was prepared to expose his own personality in his work:

Every mediocre writer tries to mask his own natural style. . . He is thus forced, at the outset, to give up any attempt at being frank or naive—a privilege which is thereby reserved for superior minds, conscious of their own worth, and therefore sure of themselves. What I mean is that these everyday writers are absolutely unable to resolve upon writing just as they think; because they have a notion that, were they to do so, their work might possibly look very childish and simple. For all that, it would not be without its value. If they would only go honestly to work, and say, quite simply, the things they really have

thought, and just as they have thought them, these writers would be readable and, within their own proper sphere, even instructive.²⁰

Charles Darwin's son Francis, in his reminiscences about his father, makes the following remark about Darwin's literary style:

In writing, he sometimes showed the same tendency to strong expressions that he did in conversation. Thus in the *Origin*, p. 440, there is a description of a larval cirripede, 'with six pairs of beautifully constructed natatory legs, a pair of magnificent compound eyes, and extremely complex antennae.' We used to laugh at him for this sentence, which we compared to an advertisement. This tendency to give himself up to the enthusiastic turn of his thought, without fear of being ludicrous appears elsewhere in his writings.²¹

It is an interesting paradox that the few human beings who have achieved some genuinely original insight into the objective nature of things have often expressed themselves in what appears to be a thoroughly personal and subjective way; whereas those who are only saying things that they think will please other people and have no real interest in objective reality often affect an abstract, impersonal and 'objective' style.

This presumably arises because to make any intellectual discovery it is necessary to have a genuine interest in reality, at least within a certain field. It is not enough just to be clever, or to have been able to win the approval of one's tutors and the esteem of one's peers; a certain motivation is necessary. And when the exceptional individual

20 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Pessimist's Handbook*, University of Nebraska Press, 1964, p. 446.

21 *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin and Selected Letters*, edited by Francis Darwin, Dover Publications, New York, 1958, p. 105.

comes to write down what he or she has discovered they may find it hard to conceal the enthusiasm which led them to discover it; or at any rate some flavour of that uniqueness of personality that led them and no-one else to achieve the insight may tend to seep into their work.

People who are only writing about some intellectual topic because they are paid to do so, or in order to win professional promotion, or because society regards them as a trained expert in the matter in hand, may well find that whatever is the fashionable literary style suits them quite well; a colourless, impersonal and 'objective' mode of writing may actually be an accurate if unintentional indicator of the real state of their interest in whatever reality underlies their field of training.

Of course not all intellectuals of genius have expressed themselves in a personal way. Newton, for example, while writing the *Principia* behaved as other people are supposed to when they are in love: he would forget to eat or sleep and scarcely knew what time of day it was. However, he did not let any of his enthusiasm for his subject reveal itself in his literary style. In fact he is supposed deliberately to have made his Latin as cold and uninteresting as possible. But in his case the intention seems to have been to discourage frivolous readers, in the hope (not entirely realised) of not becoming embroiled in distracting controversies when his book had been published.

VIII

Rentiers, Salary-Earners and Self-Made Millionaires

One observes that several of the capitalists most noted as patrons of the arts have consciously formulated the idea of freeing their beneficiaries from the cares of everyday life. Raisley Calvert wished to 'secure [Wordsworth] from want'²²; King Ludwig wrote to Wagner: 'The mean cares of everyday life I will banish from you for ever.'²³ Madame von Meck, after sending Tchaikovsky isolated payments for a number of years, eventually wrote that she intended to settle on him an annuity of 6,000 roubles 'to free him once and for all from financial difficulties and to allow him to devote all his time to composition.'²⁴

It will be interesting to see what happens when the last *rentier* has undergone the euthanasia that Lord Keynes prescribed for him. Presumably the support of artists and thinkers who cannot earn a living by their work will then rest either with the state, or in the hands of persons who have convinced society that they are performing a useful function in life and who are being rewarded with a salary commensurate with their social virtue.

²² Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth: A Biography. The Early Years, 1770-1803*, Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 252.

²³ Ernest Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, Vol. III, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1941, p. 222.

²⁴ Edward Garden, *Tchaikovsky*, Dent, London, 1973, p. 79.

The rentier

To help us assess the relative likelihood of different classes of persons—say, the *rentier*, the *entrepreneur* and the salary-earner—helping an individual of genius, let us consider how a member of each group might analyse his position to himself (always supposing that people were given to analytical mental activity of this sort). Let us start with the person with a private income. He might say to himself something like this:

‘I inherited my capital from my father/great-aunt, etc. I recognise that this was due to no particular merit on my part. Of course there are those who are singled out in wills from among other possible beneficiaries because the dead person thought the recipient had special merit or ability; but as far as I am aware I am not one of them. I attribute my good fortune to my having been lucky in the lottery of life, and I regard my having a private income as something advantageous rather than meritorious, rather as I imagine someone might feel in a crowd when he happens to be six feet tall and able to see the spectacle over the heads of his craning fellows.

‘I am not sure how my relative (or his ancestor) acquired the capital I now enjoy, but I assume it was by one of the recognised and legal methods, such as saving, investment or performing a useful service for some prince or other. All these activities have their merit of course; even to be able to pick a good stockbroker suggests an unusual degree of determination or insight into human character, since it is so difficult to find an individual who is motivated to make money on his own behalf let alone for someone else. Still, I recognise that the merit belonged to whoever acquired the capital, even if I hope that I have inherited some of his exceptional ability or endowment of character.

‘Since I am enjoying the advantages of an income that I receive without any sanction from society, I do not have any particular resistance to the idea that someone else might acquire an income without collective sanction either. I am actually able to admit to consciousness the idea that incomes which do not derive from the collective recognising ‘merit’ in an individual and rewarding him accordingly may be advantageous to the individual concerned, since I have found my private income an advantage to me. I am therefore able to consider the idea that a genius might find it advantageous to be given a private income even before society got round to recognising him as one. (Whether I am willing to be the person to provide him with such an income is of course another matter; still, I haven’t repressed the idea entirely.)

‘I have also observed that the continuity of my income does not depend on my pleasing anyone, although it does depend on my remaining continually on the *qui vive* lest my stockbroker do something ridiculous with my money, such as investing it in government stocks. I do find the fact that my livelihood cannot be taken away from me just because I have displeased other people gives me a certain independence of judgement compared with my salary-earning friends. I enjoy a freedom from a perpetual blackmail to toe the social line from which they seem to suffer, however implicitly. I am not sure why this should be, since in theory at least these salary-earners I know could profess one thing to their providers and inwardly believe another; still, the act of constantly refraining from biting the hand that feeds them seems to produce the effect that ultimately they have no teeth. I on the other hand have been known to consider the idea that the collective may be wrong (though perhaps I don’t consider it very often). In particular, I am willing to consider the idea that it may be wrong in not supporting a given individual, and even to consider supporting him myself.

‘As the advantages I enjoy do not derive in any perceptible way from the collective, I must admit that I do not always find it as easy as I should to believe that the collective is the sole source of goodness and wisdom. Of course, I always tell young people to put their trust in the collective and apply for scholarships, grants and what have you when I am cornered. But I must admit I secretly think a private income is better if you have got one, and I am not always surprised if they don’t get the grant they were seeking even if I think they deserved it. Mind you, if I am not feeling like taking over the role of the collective myself, I do pretend to be surprised and encourage them to go on trying nevertheless.’

The self-made millionaire

Let us now consider the self-made *entrepreneur*—bearing in mind that the class of such persons is smaller than is popularly supposed, a number of its apparent exemplars being people who inherited a small fortune and turned it into a large one. The self-made man might describe himself thus:

‘In deciding how to arrange the internal workings of my business I am not entirely motivated by the desire to please other people—at least I was not before the state put a half-nelson on me in the form of redundancy payments, office safety requirements, etc.; I used sometimes to think of how to make a profit. However, in a wider sense it is true that my life has been devoted to pleasing other people; in fact I made my fortune by thinking of a way of pleasing them, with a service or commodity that no-one had thought of before, or at any rate had not gone to the trouble of providing. Since the public has bought enough of my products or services to make me a millionaire I am sometimes tempted to credit it with a certain amount of good judgement.

‘As for the question of merit: I certainly worked very hard to get where I am today. When I started out I was under the distinct impression that I was working about twice as many hours in the day as my former schoolfellows who have not become millionaires. Also, while I often say there is a lot of luck in business, I actually think there is a certain amount of judgement too, and that I have got some of it. Of course, I am bound to admit that there has stopped being any very linear correlation between effort and reward in my monetary affairs; I don’t work as long hours as I used to, yet the turnover of my companies seems to go on increasing as if my business had acquired a certain momentum of its own. Also some of the more frivolous projects I have started recently made a great deal of money without my spending much time on them, whereas others have been highly distracting and not made a penny. Nevertheless all the money I have has resulted from my own efforts, and I must admit this makes me feel rather possessive about it; I am certainly not going to squander it on individuals whom I do not think are worthy of it. I am not even sure I am going to give it to my own children; I may decide to make them struggle for it as I did.

‘It has to be said that people of my sort tend to suffer from a certain prosaicism of outlook, which to us appears as common sense. To be able to throw yourself heart and soul into something as extroverted and time-consuming as running a business (and believe me you have to be thoroughly identified with the process to do it successfully) requires one to have a fairly solid belief in the meaningfulness of human affairs. I have seldom had an access of philosophical doubt, and when I have, the telephone has usually rung. As a result of this, my ideas of what is a worthy charity to support tend to be rather unimaginative - hospitals, public libraries, and the like.

‘It may also be that, since I owe my position to having been able to operate within the existing social framework and to having in a

sense received collective approval for what I have done, I am somewhat motivated to reinforce the collective's beliefs about what is meaningful when it comes to spending the money I have made.

'Whatever the reason, I am not sure I want to free anyone else to write poetry or to think about the universe.'

The salary-earner

Let us now consider our third category of potential patron, the salary-earner. Let us not deprive him of the last word on the subject; no doubt he will soon have the last word on everything that matters. He will say:

'I owe my position entirely to having acquired a certain measure of social approval, unlike the *rentier* who has none, and unlike the self-made *entrepreneur* who owes his position partly to natural ability. Pleasing other people, and particularly my employers, is the ultimate criterion of success in my profession. Of course it sometimes pleases them if I act with zeal and efficiency, but not always; sometimes it only makes them jealous, or fearful for their own jobs; sometimes it brings the men out on strike.

'Of course the long years devoted to pleasing other people rather than doing what I personally wanted have taken their toll; in particular they have led to a certain fusing of the two concepts in my mind. This carries over into my attitude to the giving of money. I tend to give money to the sort of charity to which a multiplicity of other people is also giving money. The thought of the number of other people who would approve of the charity I have chosen gives a sort of extra glow to the proceedings.

'The other feature of my life that tends to colour my attitude to giving is the strictly quantitative way in which I receive. Society still

pays me in strictly linear proportion to the amount of time I sell it, although as befits my station in life these time-periods are measured in months and years rather than hours, and the rate of remuneration is rather more than when I first started to sell my time. This means that it is very hard for me to think of money as anything other than reward for good behaviour, measured in strictly finite units. (I certainly do not think of money as freedom to do what I want, for example, or freedom to confer on someone else the power to do what he wants.) I do not see that I should be blamed for this; after all, if I did not feel that my money was a reward for giving up what I personally wanted to do in life, and that the amount received bore a fairly strict relationship to the amount of merit I have acquired in giving it up, then how could I bear to go on living at other people's behest and pleasing them rather than myself?

'Since money equals units of merit in my eyes this makes it rather a wrench for me to part with it—except of course to somebody or something with a similar degree of social approval to myself. Giving it away to someone who still has all their life before them and is not proposing to sell any of it to society as I have done but to do what pleases them instead—this is a possibility that I do not find appealing.'

IX

Salaries, Perks, and Private Incomes**Apparatchiks and rentiers**

It was sometimes suggested that despite the 1917 revolution, or perhaps one should say because of it, Soviet Russia developed a new kind of middle class, consisting of Communist Party members, and various types of professional people whose activities were considered valuable to the state, such as engineers, international athletes, ballet-dancers, and so forth. These groups were said to enjoy a considerably higher standard of living than the rest of the population, with special privileges, such as the freedom to buy goods in special shops for foreign tourists instead of having to queue for goods in the shops frequented by *hoi polloi*. It was even suggested that this favoured class was becoming hereditary to some extent, since the offspring of Communist Party officials went to the best schools and hence were more likely to reach the kind of position in later life that would entitle them to the same preferential treatment that their parents enjoyed.

Psychologically, however, there was a world of difference between the position of the upper class in Soviet Russia and that of, say, the capital-inheriting class in England prior to the twentieth century. A Communist Party official owed his or her position to the continued approval of their fellows. No matter how long he enjoyed this it had to be continually won afresh by the expression of the right social attitudes, or at the very least the avoidance of the wrong ones. The advantages enjoyed by his or her children were conditional on the parents retaining this social approval, and the children in turn found themselves in the same psychological position as their father or

mother when they ‘inherited’ his or her membership of the upper class, no matter how many generations of their ancestors had been favoured servants of the state. Similarly, no matter how great a performing artist’s achievement in his or her own particular field, they soon found their privileges removed once they no longer commanded collective approval outside that field.

The position of someone in a Western country who inherited capital, on the other hand, was not dependent on his retaining social approval. It was dependent on his retaining his capital. The psychological manoeuvres required for this may be very different from those required for remaining acceptable to the collective.

One also observes that the advantages allegedly enjoyed by a member of the upper class in Soviet Russia seemed to consist mainly of ‘perks’ that were also available to all the other members of this favoured class. The collective said to the favoured individual, in effect, ‘If you are good and retain our approval, and provided your needs and interests are shared by a considerable number of your fellow-men, we will cater for them quite handsomely. We will send your offspring to special schools if you share the general interest in raising a family; we will send you to relatively luxurious villas if you share the common interest in holidays.’ However, no amount of privileges of this kind add up to the freedom to dispose of one’s time and energy in the way one wishes, however idiosyncratic that way may be.

We should note that an individual only becomes eligible for perks in a system as that of Soviet Russia when he has passed the scrutiny of a multiplicity of other persons as to his suitability. So there is a double safeguard at work in this type of situation: only people who are approved of by a number of other people come to enjoy this relatively lavish life-style, and the life-style is only allowed to be lavish in ways that a number of people can enjoy.

A collective's tolerance of perks is a good example of what is meant by 'a permissive society': something is permitted if the collective has vetted it in advance, and if it is something done by large numbers of other people. You are permitted the use of a motor car because the implications of being able to drive yourself about at will are well worked out and not very astonishing. Also a great many other people are likewise driving themselves about in cars.

What a permissive society does not permit you is to have a private income over a certain size (or at least it signals its disapproval by many very practical penalties and obstacles). The implications of an exceptional individual having such an income are something that the collective can never quite calculate in advance, and he might choose to spend it on an activity which only he considered significant.

The psychology of time-serving

It may have been the case that the upper class in Soviet Russia were paid larger salaries than the average for the population, and to the extent that goods and services were available at all they could presumably spend their income as they wished. However, the salary could only be earned in the first place by doing something of which the collective approved. This means that someone who wished to do something for which the collective was not prepared to pay him was reduced to doing it in his spare time or not at all.

By contrast, the English capitalist first inherited his income and then spent it on whatever he considered the most important thing in life, whether it was agricultural improvement as in the case of 'Turnip' Townsend, architecture in the case of Lord Burlington, or theoretical physics in the case of Henry Cavendish. His modern Russian counterpart had first to convince the collective that he or she was the sort of

person who should be allowed to do one of these things, and then they might or might not be paid to do it.

It may be that there were Soviet Russians whose ability and motivation were in every way comparable to those of Townsend, Burlington and Cavendish and who succeeded in persuading the collective that they should be paid to pursue their interests in exactly the way they want. However, their psychological position can never have been the same as that of their capitalist predecessors, since their continuing to practise their professions as they wished would always have been conditional on their retaining collective approval for what they were doing, whereas the activities of a Townsend or Burlington were limited only by the size of their capital and their ability to pay other people to do things they wanted to see done.

Of course it can never be proved that the possibility of removal of collective financial support for one's work is having any particular psychological effect on any given individual. The individual may even deny that it is having any effect himself, and may assert that he is doing exactly what he would be doing if it were his own money he was spending. We can see in this context what a help behaviourism is to the collective. An architect is someone who is engaged in the activity of architecture. It does not make sense to suggest that a Lord Burlington and a hireling of the collective might be two quite different sorts of animal just because of some hypothetical difference in their 'state of mind' or 'psychological position', especially if the hireling of the collective asserts that his position of financial dependence is not having any effect on his mind.

X

Patronage by Committees**The motivation of committees**

It is interesting to consider the psychological differences between individual patronage and patronage by committees. People often talk as if all that was wrong with the Arts Council, for example, was that it was not given enough money by the collective. However, it is possible that there are psychological differences between giving away other people's money and giving away your own. This possibility seems not to be discussed.

One psychological difference that comes to mind is that a committee, or even an individual, spending money provided by the collective is answerable to the provider for the way the money is spent. An individual giving away his own money is answerable to no-one. (That of course is why it is so undesirable that he or she should have any surplus money to give.)

Then there is the question of motivation. In the past the class of individual patrons of the arts must presumably have coincided fairly closely with the class of those who wanted to see something done, even if it was only for their personal aggrandisement rather than a desire to promote art for art's sake. I do not see that one need suppose any particular motivation on the part of a committee other than that of fulfilling what they conceive to be their social obligations. People get to be members of committees by pleasing other people; it has yet to be established that this is a good qualification for discerning individual genius, or any indication that its possessor will want to promote and not hinder genius if he or she discerns it.

Committees and their pound of flesh

An interesting phenomenon concerning committees is that, although they are fundamentally not interested in seeing things done, they are often very concerned to get a pound of flesh from the recipient of their bounty in the form of interim reports, descriptions of work in progress, etc.

This syndrome is probably exhibited in its clearest form by committees that are ostensibly for the financial support of scientific research. Since the desire to find out anything of significance about the universe is so rare an occurrence, it is obviously unlikely that any given committee really cares whether the scientists it supports produce any results that actually advance knowledge. (If any individual really cared about advancing knowledge he might well consider that one lifetime was scarcely long enough to risk spending any part of it sitting on a committee.) Nevertheless, committees for the support of science are liable to show a fine scrupulosity about getting their beneficiaries to report at regular intervals on the progress of their work. It does not matter if all the recipient has to report is that his work has failed to progress, so long as the report of his futile labours is sufficiently lengthy and submitted in triplicate.

At first this scrupulosity might appear to arise from the fact that the committee is answerable to the collective that provides its funds and must have evidence that they have been wisely spent. However, one cannot help noticing that should any committee-member happen to want to make the individual pay dearly for the bounty that society has bestowed upon him, then the requirement to submit interim reports might very well fulfil that function. A scientist whose research was actually going well might not welcome having to break off and

describe it, whereas one whose work was going badly might not want to dwell on his failures but to get on with something new.

Meanwhile, of course, the ability to write the sort of reports that satisfy committees is no guarantee that the writer is actually able, or even wanting, to advance knowledge.

Committees' hatred of serendipity

Another curiosity about certain scientific committees is their keenness for you to describe exactly what you are going to do before you do it. This manifests itself as a demand for detailed 'research programmes'. Apparently they have never heard that research sometimes involves adapting oneself to the unexpected, let alone of Sir Alexander Fleming's fortuitous penicillin mould and the element of serendipity that has entered into many of the scientific discoveries of the past.

I know of one research committee that proceeded on the following basis. If you submitted a research programme which contained a new idea that had never been tried before, this was turned down on the grounds that the idea had never been tried before and therefore had yet to prove its worth. On the other hand if you first did a pilot study, or began the work on a small scale and then when it showed every sign of working you asked them to give you the money to do it properly on a large scale, they would say: 'We cannot support projects that have already been begun, because we were not consulted before they were started and therefore had no opportunity of influencing the way they were carried out.' This brilliant application of the Law of the Excluded Middle enabled the committee to maintain a healthy surplus of income over expenditure each year, and its members were able to bewail the lack of suitable projects to finance. 'If only this subject had an Einstein', they would say.

Committees and meanness

Committees are not only mean in themselves, they are a cause of meanness in others. This arises from the fact that they are not really there to disburse money, as appearances might suggest, but to ensure that no individual benefits from it.

When Michelangelo finally yielded to Pope Julius's insistence and agreed to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the question arose of how he was to get up there to do it. His predecessor, who appears to have been somewhat less of a genius than Michelangelo, and - if Vasari is to be believed - somewhat less motivated to make a proper job of it, had had the idea of boring holes in the ceiling through which ropes could be lowered and the painter thus raised to the desired height.²⁵ However, as Michelangelo pointed out, this left unsolved the question of how to fill in the holes and paint them over when the rest of the ceiling was finished. So Michelangelo eventually designed his own scaffolding for the purpose and gave the ropes which his predecessor had bought to a poor carpenter. According to Vasari, this made the carpenter very happy, as the ropes were sufficiently valuable to enable him to provide his daughter with a dowry and marry her off.

Now Michelangelo was only able to commit an act of this kind because he was answerable to an individual and not to a committee, and that individual himself felt answerable to no-one and was only interested in seeing the work done. If the financing of the Sistine ceiling frescoes had been administered by a committee, one can envisage a number of possible outcomes. Michelangelo might still in a moment of rashness have given the ropes to his friend and then

²⁵ Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, abridged and edited by Betty Burroughs, Alien and Unwin, London, 1960, p. 267.

found himself hounded for misappropriation of funds. (This actually happened to him later in his career when a committee took over from the deceased Julius the supervision of Julius's monument, for which Michelangelo had agreed to provide sculptures.) Alternatively, the committee, carefully eschewing favouritism, might have decided to give a piece of the rope to each of the poor carpenters in Rome and divided it up into lengths that were just too short to be of use to any of them. Alternatively, and perhaps more likely, the committee might still be considering the question and the ropes would still be awaiting their fate in the Vatican.

Committees and obstruction

If committees had had their way Europeans might still be arguing about whether to discover America. One committee spent four and a half years considering Columbus's project for sailing west to the Indies and then rejected it. The committee 'judged his promises and offers were impossible and vain and worthy of rejection', according to one of Columbus's earliest biographers. They advised Ferdinand and Isabella 'that it was not a proper object for their royal authority to favour an affair that rested on such weak foundations, and which appeared uncertain and impossible to any educated person, however little learning he might have.'²⁶

Just what can be achieved when the state sets its mind to controlling the efforts of individual adventurers may be illustrated by the history of China. The Chinese had invented the compass as early as the eleventh century and by the fourteenth century individual ship-owners of South China had developed a flourishing trade with Southeast Asia

²⁶ Quoted in Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus*, Little, Brown & Co., Boston, 1942, p. 97.

and India. However, officialdom had apparently always disapproved of this form of private enterprise on the grounds that it exported too much metal currency out of the country, and towards the end of the fourteenth century the Ming dynasty first of all established a state control over sea trade and finally in 1424 abolished it altogether. One historian describes how this was done, and the effects it had, as follows:

The government went so far as to forbid the construction of seagoing vessels, presumably because in private hands many of them indulged in piracy or smuggling and could not be properly controlled by a land-fast officialdom. The result was to deliver the coasts of China into the hands of Japanese and Malay pirates, who from the fifteenth century onward made the China Sea unsafe for peaceable commerce.

The Chinese certainly possessed the technical resources to have anticipated the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean. World history would surely have taken a far different turn if Vasco da Gama had discovered a powerful Chinese overseas empire in possession of the principal ports and strategic gateways of the Indian Ocean in 1498. If the mercantile communities of south China had been left to their own devices, still more if the imperial government had supported and encouraged their activities, such an empire might well have confronted the Portuguese explorer.²⁷

²⁷ William H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West; A History of the Human Community*, University of Chicago Press, 1963, pp. 526-7.

XI

Grants of Capital and Grants of Income

One disadvantage of being financed by someone else's money and not your own is that the patron may always decide to cut off his patronage. At one stage King Ludwig became impatient with the length of time Wagner was taking to complete *The Ring* and decided to stage the first, completed half in his own theatre in Munich. Wagner resisted this premature staging of his truncated work in every way he could, but the king had the last word. 'These theatre people must learn to obey my orders, not Wagner's whims,' he said. 'Pereat the whole lot of them.'²⁸ What is more to the point, he threatened to withhold Wagner's allowance if he persisted in his opposition. Wagner, who had certainly not been saving out of his royal income, could only retire in dudgeon to his house in Zurich.

Needless to say, a committee is just as likely to change its mind about supporting someone as is an individual. In fact, to the extent that it is more susceptible to outside pressure (being accountable to some collective entity for its funds), it may be expected to be even more unreliable.

However, there is one form of patronage that is not open to the objection that it may be cut off at any time, and that is where the beneficiary is given capital rather than income.

In 1798 two members of the Wedgwood family decided to give Coleridge an annuity of £150 a year so that he would not have to enter the Unitarian Ministry to obtain an income and could continue working

²⁸ Quoted in Walter Panofsky, *Wagner: A Pictorial Biography*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1963, p. 86.

at literature. The Wedgwoods had ideas about improving the human condition and decided that Coleridge was the man to help them do it, apparently because of his powers as a thinker rather than as a poet.

Incidentally, it seems a somewhat anachronistic idea, to think that you could best help humanity by giving your money to a single, exceptional individual whom you considered to be above the norm in some respect rather than a multiplicity of people whom you considered to be below it.

Wordsworth benefitted from a similarly anti-social act of generosity, albeit on a rather more modest scale. When he was twenty-three he formed a friendship with a young man of private means called Raisley Calvert. Calvert suffered from consumption, and 'aware that he was gravely ill, determined to make a will bequeathing a legacy to Wordsworth sufficient to enable him to live without a profession.'²⁹ As Wordsworth put it, the purpose of the bequest was 'to secure me from want, if not to render me independent', and 'to enable me to pursue my literary views or any other views with greater success... I had had but little connection [with Raisley Calvert], and the act was done entirely from a confidence on his part that I had powers and attainments which might be of use to mankind'.³⁰

Again, this seems a somewhat anachronistic idea, that the best way of helping mankind was to give £900 to a single friend, and a poet at that, so as to exempt him from the need to earn his living like everyone else. What shocking presumption on the part of a dying man of twenty one to think that he had the ability, without consulting any socially recognised authority, to discern in his friend powers and

²⁹ Mary Moorman, *Wordsworth, The Early Years 1770-1803*, Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 252.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 251-2.

attainments which society had not yet recognised, still less seen fit to reward.

Of course the number of human beings who wish permanently to free an individual of genius from the need to earn a living is extremely small. However, the likelihood of a multiplicity of such persons coinciding on the same committee is even smaller. A committee that wanted to make itself redundant? A collective entity that wanted irrevocably to free an individual from answerability to the collective?

As a matter of fact all the committees I have known have shown a great predilection for supporting only very specific projects; the idea of providing general running expenses even for a finite period of time, let alone for the rest of an individual's or organisation's life, seems to strike them as vaguely indecent.

The way the specific-grant-giving syndrome works is this: if you only give money for very specific projects, this means that only individuals or organisations whose living or running expenses are already catered for will ever qualify for grants. This in turn means that only individuals or organisations already in receipt of social support will ever qualify; which would rule out Wordsworth or Coleridge for a start.

XII

The Redistribution of Wealth

Redistribution and wealth destruction

We may question whether the collective ever deliberately redistributes wealth, if we define wealth as an amount of capital sufficiently large to enable an individual to do something he or she wants without first obtaining social approval. One observes the collective taking away useful amounts of capital from individuals so that their potential freedom of action and that of their descendants is correspondingly reduced, but for the most part one only observes the collective giving money to individuals in such small parcels that they are better called income. For example, if an individual wants to do something with his unemployment benefit or disablement allowance he had better have a want that is sufficiently modest not to require capital for its fulfilment at all, or else start saving hard and hope that the collective will not debase the currency faster than he can create fresh capital out of the income he is receiving.

There may be cases in which the collective has redistributed wealth as an apparently accidental side-effect of some other legislative intention. For example, let us suppose that someone owns a house worth £200,000 and it is occupied by someone else who is paying him rent for the use of this house. Let us further suppose that as a result of legislation the owner is neither able to raise the rent in line with inflation nor to take possession of his own house again if he wants to. And let us suppose that after a number of years the owner decides that it has become more of a liability than an asset and sells it to the only person who is willing to buy it, namely the occupant, for a price

of £20,000; and immediately thereafter the new owner sells it on the open market for £200,000. Then we might say that wealth has been redistributed from the original owner to his erstwhile tenant.³¹

Redistribution and wealth creation

Let us consider what might be called deliberate redistribution of wealth in the sense in which we have defined it.

Henry VIII might be said to have redistributed wealth when he dissolved the monasteries and gave their lands to individuals he favoured; although in this case perhaps we should say that he actually created wealth, since prior to the dissolution an individual monk could only have benefitted from the land if his wants met with the approval of the mini-collective which was his monastic order.

When two race-horse owners staked their estates or part of them on the outcome of a race on Newmarket Heath, there may be said to have been a redistribution of wealth after the race (always assuming it was not a dead-heat).

To the extent that the Stock Exchange consists of a trading place for individuals rather than collective institutions, then it might be said to be continually redistributing wealth, since the successful investor tends to make money at the expense of the unsuccessful.

Redistribution by chance

A financial institution run by the collective which might be said actually to create wealth is the premium bond. A large number of individuals lend a larger or smaller sum of money to the state, which does not pay

³¹ Situations like this arose in Britain following World War II, as a result of successive governments failing to repeal legislation introduced during the war to give tenants security of occupation.

them interest, but instead distributes at random to a number of these individuals each month a smaller or larger prize. A very small number of these prizes are so large that they would confer on an individual who wanted it a very considerable amount of freedom.

A somewhat similar institution is a football pool or the National Lottery. An operation of this kind might also be said to create wealth; a very large number of people pay what is for the most part a very small amount of income for a random chance of winning what is in a very few cases a considerable amount of capital.

It is an interesting question why the collective tolerates any such institution as the National Lottery or premium bonds when their results seem to go counter to so many other forms of collective activity. In fact the collective actually seems to regard random capital-formation of this kind with a particularly benevolent eye, since gains from premium bonds and the Lottery are not taxed.

However, in the first place we might note that the collective is destroying wealth in the hands of individuals far faster than it is creating it. For example, the top premium bond prize in 2007 was £50,000 [?]; and twelve of these prizes were paid out each year. I do not know how many estates the Inland Revenue handles each year on which their take is £50,000 or more, but I imagine it is considerably in excess of twelve. And that is of course not taking into account the many other ways in which the state is currently destroying capital in private hands, such as inflation.

It may be, indeed, that the collective does take into account all the ways in which it is destroying private capital when it permits the parcelling out of these few new bits. Perhaps the collective reckons that they will so soon be wiped out by inflation and taxes that there will scarcely be time for any exceptional individual to run the risk of benefitting from them.

Another reason why the collective is prepared to institute a scheme like the premium bonds or the National Lottery may simply be the randomness with which the prizes are distributed. Perhaps society calculates that the number of individuals of really exceptional ability in each generation is very small; that even in relatively capitalistic societies of the past a whole tribe may not have been sufficient to produce one person willing and able to make a truly significant contribution to culture; and that the chances of the £50,000 prize being allocated to such an individual are incalculably remote.

If this is the way the collective reasons, if only unconsciously, it would appear to be justified, at least so far. I do not know of any original contribution to knowledge or the arts of which it could be said, 'This would not have happened but for X winning the football pools/the Lottery/the top premium bond prize.'

Redistribution and the hereditary principle

It is possible to see a certain irony in the fact that the modern collective tolerates the random distribution of occasional pieces of capital. The hereditary principle has few defendants; the modern mind is reluctant even to consider the possibility that the stratification of society that took place in a country like England over a period of hundreds of years, and in particular the differential distribution of capital that arose, was in any way correlated with differential ability and personality traits, and that ability and personality traits are to any extent genetically transmitted from one generation to the next. If some people inherit capital, and others do not, the almost universal response is, 'But why should X inherit wealth, and not Y? X has no special merit, he is just the son of so-and-so; he has done nothing to earn his money.' In other words people react very much as if they regarded the distribution of

capital on the hereditary principle as entirely random, and as if they found this randomness in some way offensive. Yet the randomness inherent in the distribution of the premium bond prizes apparently does not arouse anything like the same hostility. Can it be that the opponents of the hereditary principle secretly suspect that, despite all their assertions to the contrary, ability and personality may be to some extent inherited, and that the distribution of capital under the old system was not as random as they would have liked?

XIII

Different Kinds of Capital

Distraction by physical assets

It is open to question whether the collective has ever seriously encouraged the accumulation of capital by individuals. However, it is interesting to consider whether it has at least been more tolerant of the possession of capital in some forms rather than others, and in particular whether it turns a relatively blind eye to the possession by the individual of non-income-producing forms, such as jewellery, antique pictures and furniture, or even vintage wines.

If this is indeed the case, it is interesting to speculate whether one of the motives behind the relative tolerance of these non-income-producing forms of capital is that they do not immediately increase the individual's freedom of action, but only do so potentially. As long as Shelley had money, which was not being debased by collective action, invested in government stock of the day, he had an income each year which he could spend in any way he pleased. An individual with an Old Master on his wall cannot do anything with it but enjoy it. It is only if he sold it for cash that it would translate into increased freedom of action.

Another characteristic of valuable physical assets is that not only do they not produce a useful flow of income, as gilt-edged stocks did before inflation became endemic, but they are actually liable to involve the owner in what one might call psychological expense, i.e. a feeling of responsibility for their welfare, anxiety lest they be damaged or stolen, and so forth.

For example, let us suppose that in an attempt to preserve one's capital, and hence one's potential freedom of action, one has purchased a piece of eighteenth century French furniture. One's best course of action, if one wish to preserve one's mind free to continue any abstract train of thought, is to have it put away in some very safe, air-conditioned vault, where no-one can see it. One will have to pay someone to guard it, and there will be the constant responsibility of seeing that it is being kept in the manner and under the conditions to which such things are accustomed.

No investment is ever completely safe, of course. Even in Shelley's time the government might have started a great inflation to pay for the Napoleonic war, or it might have lost the war, let the country be invaded and failed to keep up the payments on its stock. Or Shelley's bank manager might have absconded with his share certificates, or done whatever else was needed to deprive him of his income. However, on balance I think the man of genius who had his capital invested in government stock had, prior to the present fashion for inflating national currencies, a less distracting investment than one who held it in valuable physical assets.

The burden of the stately home

An extreme example of a valuable physical asset is the large country house, or 'stately home'. When Inheritance Tax, originally termed 'Capital Transfer Tax', was introduced in the United Kingdom it was pointed out that one effect of this tax would be that within a relatively small number of generations it would leave no house above a certain size in private hands. Curiously enough, a few voices were raised in protest at this effect of the tax—in a very mild and civilised way of course. It is interesting to consider why this should have been so, since

the idea of equivalent amounts of private capital held in more abstract forms (such as stocks and shares) being destroyed within a few generations apparently aroused no similar alarm.

The arguments produced in defence of the private ownership of stately homes took such forms as: 'it is important to preserve the lived-in atmosphere . . .', 'the private owner takes a more personal interest in the maintenance . . .', 'nationalisation would be a drain on the public purse. . .', etc. As far as I know no-one protested, 'If these large country houses are taken away from their private owners, this will leave that much the less capital in private hands which will be at least potentially capable of being convened into freedom of action by a sale for cash.'

Is it possible that people at large have less resistance to the idea of an individual owning a stately home than they do to his owning an equivalent amount of stocks and shares? And could this in turn have anything to do with the fact that at present the ownership of a stately home is an excellent example of a psychological liability rather than a psychological asset? From time to time we are regaled in the news media with stories of how the Duchess of So-and-So has to wash all the historic family chandeliers herself nowadays because she cannot trust paid help not to break them; or how Mr. Y. redecorated X. Hall himself because his income did not run to employing outside labour. Does the collective instinctively know that Mr. Y. and the Duchess are unlikely to have been having any original thoughts about the universe while so engaged, or unlikely to have had time to write them down if they did?

Historical examples

Perhaps the modern reader will be disposed to doubt that intellectual or artistic activity cannot be combined effectively with running a stately home, or indeed any other kind of business. However, at least

one may say with certainty that not all the geniuses of the past have found their intellectual or artistic pursuits compatible with material distractions. Some of those fortunate enough to enjoy the benefit of a private income even made attempts to try to preserve that income in as trouble-free a form as possible.

Vasari tells us the following about the sculptor Donatello:

Piero [de' Medici] gave Donatello a farm which brought in sufficient income for an easy life. The artist rejoiced and considered himself secure from the fear of dying of hunger. But within a year he returned to Piero, the deed to the property in his hand. He said he would rather starve than listen to the complaints and outcries of the farmers who came pestering him every third day with calamities of wind, of storms, and of taxes. Piero laughed, but he took back the farm and gave Donatello the equivalent in cash income paid weekly at the bank, an arrangement that pleased the old man greatly.³²

Admittedly Donatello was too old to work at sculpture at this time, but he evidently still felt quite strongly about keeping his mind free from distractions.

Descartes seems to have felt similarly about his family estates. When his father died and Descartes inherited, he sold the estates and invested the money so as to obtain an income of six or seven thousand francs a year. Evidently Descartes's eclectic intellectual interests did not extend to farm management.

It is said that the physicist Henry Cavendish was once visited by his bankers (on his death he was the largest holder of certain government stocks in the country). Their bankers' instincts were pained by the amount of money he kept on his account; could they not invest the

³² Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, op. cit., p. 91.

money for him more profitably? However, Cavendish was evidently willing to pay not to have his privacy invaded any further by them, as he told them that if they troubled him about his money again he would be happy to move it elsewhere.

XIV

Human Rights and Private Property - I

The irrelevance of censorship

One might ask how it is that in the past men and women of genius have been able to make original contributions to thought in countries that had no official freedom of speech, publication, or assembly, if these so-called 'human rights' are as crucial as their modern protagonists imply. The answer is that these people of genius achieved what they did thanks to private incomes, their own or that of someone else. The societies in which they lived may have been indifferent or even hostile to freedom of speech and the like, but they tended to have a tolerant attitude to the concept of private property.

Let us consider some examples. Descartes' thinking led him to two conclusions among others: that the earth rotated and that the universe was infinite. He included these ideas in a book he was writing called *Le Monde*, but when he heard that the Inquisition had condemned Galileo for expounding similar views, he decided not to publish it. However, there is no reason to suppose that he stopped thinking about such matters. The Inquisition may have been indirectly responsible for the non-publication of his book, at least during his lifetime, but they did not have any direct control over the private income which enabled him to write it.

It is even questionable whether the sort of censorship imposed by old-style capitalist societies is an efficient method of preventing the emergence of new ideas or works of art. Publication is only the last and most peripheral link in the chain of production of a new artistic or intellectual work. It is clearly more effective to attack the original thought

at its psychological source, in the stages of preparation, conception or execution, by depriving the original mind of its financial independence or any hope of achieving it. Then the mind in question will be unable to provide itself with the necessary conditions for its work without first gaining the support and approval of the collective. If the results of its work are likely to be of the kind that the collective will want to censor, then this support will not be forthcoming and not only will the work never see the light of day but it will never even be begun.

Historically speaking, censorship alone, unaccompanied by any attack on the original thinker's financial independence of the collective, seldom seems to have done more than delay the publication of new ideas. Sometimes it did not even do that. There have been occasions on which a foreign country was willing to permit the publication of a new work that was banned in the author's own. For example, when Galileo was condemned by the Inquisition and his books banned, the manuscript of his last work, the *Discourses concerning Two New Sciences*, was smuggled out of Italy and published in Holland.

A similar example is provided by the life of Kant. His essay *Religion within the Limits of Pure Reason* was to have been published by the *Berliner Monatsschrift*, but the Prussian government, which had recently established a strict censorship of any writing that did not support orthodox Lutheranism, refused permission to publish. Kant then sent the essay to some friends in Jena and had it published by the university press there, Jena being under the jurisdiction, not of Prussia, but of the Duke of Weimar (the same one, incidentally, who was currently patronising Goethe).

The episode concerning Galileo's book also provides an example of the relative importance of economic factors. If Galileo had not been able to live privately in his own house following the Inquisition's condemnation, waited on by his own servants and not compelled to

earn his living, he would not have been able to write the *Discourses* at all.

The benefits of chauvinism

It is interesting to note that socialists do not seem to like the division of the world into a number of different sovereign states. They prefer the idea of a single world government. This goal is presented in the most idealistic light: no more wars, peace and plenty for all, etc. However, it is worth pointing out that once a single world government had been established, and it had found it necessary or expedient to introduce a censorship of any kind, even a merely implicit one, there could be no more episodes like those we have described from the lives of Galileo and Kant. If an intellectual found his works banned that would be the end of the matter; there would be nowhere to export his manuscripts, nor even any question of emigrating bodily himself.

Socialists seem to dislike the idea of competition between states rather as they dislike the idea of economic competition between individuals. However, competition between different countries has been known to work to the economic advantage of exceptional individuals; the heads of government or even the ordinary citizens have sometimes rivalled each other to keep the services of some man of genius, or just to retain the reflected glory of having him work among them. For example, Beethoven was once considering leaving Vienna - or at least he claimed to be considering it - in order to accept an offer to be Court Musician elsewhere. This seems to have stimulated three of his aristocratic friends in Vienna to club together and provide him with an annuity as an inducement for him to stay.

The existence of a multiplicity of sovereign states also means that it is sometimes possible for a man of genius who is being persecuted

in one state to emigrate to another. The history of thought provides many examples of this process. When Rousseau published *Emil*, the French government issued a warrant for his arrest and he decided to flee the country. His native Geneva would have nothing to do with him. However, Frederick the Great was more sympathetic and allowed him to settle near Neuchâtel, which was then under his jurisdiction. Three years later Rousseau's neighbours, led by the local vicar, had so taken against him that they accused him of poisoning people and he was obliged to flee again, this time to England, where Hume had offered to befriend him.

The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes likewise emigrated more than once. He was a Royalist, and in 1640 when such sentiments became unfashionable in England, he fled to France. However, in 1651 he published his *Leviathan*, which included attacks on the Catholic Church; this did not please the French government, so Hobbes fled back to England.

It is not only thinkers who have benefitted from the possibility of emigration. In 1606 the painter Caravaggio, who was apparently of a quarrelsome disposition, stabbed his opponent in a tennis match, and was obliged to flee Rome. However, as Italy was at that time split up into a number of different states, he did not have to go any further than Naples before he found people who were willing to employ him, at least for a time. More recently, the composer Richard Wagner was forced to seek asylum in Switzerland after a warrant had been issued for his arrest on account of his support of the 1849 uprising in Dresden.

In fact the life of Wagner might be taken as illustrating another advantage to the man of genius of there being many different sovereign states. Wagner was always on the lookout for some head of government to support him financially and back his schemes; he made overtures to Bismarck; he had hopes of the Duke of Weimar who supported Liszt;

the Grand Duke of Baden flirted with helping him on a large scale but never did. Wagner even received an approach at one time from the Emperor of Brazil. On a statistical basis alone the division of Germany into a number of different states must have increased Wagner's chances of eventually finding a ruler who would support him on a grand scale. It did not provide him with any guarantee of such an outcome, of course, but eventually it so happened that one did. Now that the Wittelsbachs, the Dukes and Grand-Dukes of Weimar and Baden, the Kings of Saxony and so forth, have all been swept away in the name of progress, society may well feel that it has considerably reduced the chance of anything so outrageous ever happening again.

Does it matter that various countries, in supporting or harbouring emigrant men of genius or their works, may have been motivated by a desire to demonstrate their independence of their neighbours or to score off them, rather than by a disinterested desire for the advancement of culture? Human nature being what it is, it may be safer to set one's faith in the chauvinism and vaingloriousness of human beings than in their compassion and idealism.

XV

Human Rights and Private Property – II**The economics of publishing**

It appears that the takeover of publishing houses by large industrial corporations and the merger of formerly independent publishers into large groups became the subject of a public debate at one time in America, on the grounds that it might become a threat to intellectual freedom. For example, in 1978 Western Pacific Industries, which was primarily a railway operator, made a bid for Houghton and Mifflin, the Boston textbook publisher. ‘In a highly publicised move, authors of books representing half of the company’s 125 million in revenues, including luminaries like J.K. Galbraith³³ and Archibald MacLeish³⁴, threatened to ‘re-examine’ their relationship with Houghton’s if the deal went through. Western Pacific beat a hasty retreat.’³⁵ At first sight here might appear to be a cause after one’s own heart. The article describing the Houghton and Mifflin affair refers to the ideal of intellectual freedom, to the status of America as ‘a constitutionally-guaranteed ‘market place of ideas’’, and to the question of how to ‘ensure information remains disseminated from diverse and antagonistic sources.’

33 An economist, once employed by the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

34 An American poet.

35 David Lascelles, *Financial Times*, 18th January 1979.

However, it is always an interesting mental exercise to practise scepticism when a large number of people seem to be espousing the cause of the exceptional individual. In the present instance a little analytical thought suggests that the question of corporate mergers in relation to intellectual freedom is something of a red herring. A publishing house that is no longer owned and run by a single man starts to function very much as an arm of the collective. Books submitted to it tend to be referred to ‘experts’ for ‘appraisal’. Decisions on what to publish tend to be discussed by committees. Even if an individual editor or director appears to be deciding the fate of a manuscript, his own position may depend on his retaining the approval of his peers. In fact it may not make a great difference to culture whether there are a large number of large publishers or a small number of even larger ones.

What might make a difference would be the existence of a large number each owned and run by a single person, so that the exceptional individual only had to convince a single man or woman that his book was worth publishing. Such a publishing enterprise would nowadays tend to be described as ‘a private empire’, run in a ‘feudal’ way, on the ‘whims’ of its owner.

It is of course quite possible that an exceptional individual would not be able to persuade any of these ‘autocratic’ publishers to publish his book, no matter how many of them there might be. This means that ultimately the only real safeguard of freedom of speech is not the absolute number of different publishing houses but the ability of the individual author to publish his books at his own expense. What affects the ease or difficulty with which the individual can take advantage of this possibility is such things as estate duties, inheritance taxes, capital transfer taxes, capital gains taxes, ‘hidden’ taxes due to inflation,

discriminatory taxes on ‘unearned’ income, and even sales taxes and ‘progressive’ rates of tax on earned income.

I wonder if Professor Galbraith or Archibald MacLeish ever publicly discussed the potential effect of their country’s death taxes on its status as a constitutionally-guaranteed market place of ideas. When the United States first began to tax an individual’s capital gains did any famous poet or professor raise the question of whether this might reduce the chances of some unpopular individual disseminating his views from his own ‘antagonistic source’ before he was dead? Would it be possible to rally the support of fifty per cent of the authors of any publishing house behind a protest at the effect of inflation on saving to publish your own book?

The economics of self-publishing

For an individual to be able to publish a book against the will of the collective it is necessary, not merely that there should be nominal freedom of speech, but also that he should be able to collect together enough money, from gifts, inheritance or savings, to pay a printer to produce it for him.

Needless to say, all the aforementioned ways of accumulating money beyond the most pressing needs of the moment are currently under constant pressure from the collective. Gifts and inheritance are heavily taxed, and personal saving is a matter of running uphill against the downward-moving escalator of inflation.

We may also point out the effect of the progressive levelling out of incomes, due not merely to overt operations of the collective such as taxation, but also to the gradual erosion of market forces as a determinant of wages. Once upon a time a teacher of Greek might have earned several times as much as a printer’s assistant because (among other

reasons) there are fewer people who are able to master Greek than there are people who can master the skills involved in printing. Let us imagine a society in which a retired professor of Greek receives three thousand units of currency a year, and a printer’s assistant receives fifteen hundred. Let us further suppose that, by living modestly, a single individual can get by on one thousand units *per annum* for basic expenditures. It is clear that by saving hard for nine months the retired professor can afford to employ a printer’s assistant to work for a whole year on producing his book, or more realistically, four assistants for three months, each assistant doing different parts of the production process.

Let us now imagine a society in which a printer’s assistant receives the same per annum as a retired professor of Greek, viz. three thousand units of currency. It is clear that the professor will now have to save for a year and a half before he can afford to employ a printer to produce his book.

This is of course assuming that basic living expenses are still only one thousand units a year. However, if we assume that all the other workers in this second society have enjoyed a rise in income comparable to that of our printer’s assistant, it is likely that basic living expenses have gone up somewhat. Let us be modest and assume that they have doubled. They are now two thousand a year, so our professor can only save one thousand per annum and consequently has to wait three years before he can afford the publication of his book.

Of course if we add in the effect of inflation, constantly eroding the professor’s savings, then there is reason to believe that the professor may be dead before his book sees the light of day.

I have chosen this particular example because there was a time when Nietzsche was a retired professor of classical philology and publishing his books at his own expense, using the savings he was able

to make out of his pension (combined in his case with a small inheritance). It seems to me that Nietzsche would have found it considerably harder to do what he did today, and for reasons that have nothing to do with official attitudes to human rights in general and freedom of speech in particular.

XVI

Human Rights and Private Property – III

The overvaluation of publication

It is interesting that the modern concern for the human rights of intellectuals seems to be concentrated on the social end of the creative process: publication, or the great moment when the individual finally submits his offering to the tribunal of public opinion.

One wonders whether there is not an element of wishful thinking at work here: the intellectual ought to regard the moment of publication as the most important part of his work; the question of whether the multitude agree or disagree with his ideas ought to be of the most burning interest to him; in fact the desire to win the approval and acclaim of the collective ought to be the individual's driving motive for thinking at all.

Perhaps the modern protagonists of human rights are afraid that the motive behind original intellectual activity is actually not social at all, and that genius is liable to indulge in intellectual activity purely for its own sake and without much thought for the social consequences. Perhaps they suspect him of the heresy of believing that fame and acclamation are not the ultimate arbiters of significance where original ideas are concerned. Perhaps they are secretly aware that publication may sometimes even disturb the very conditions, such as leisure and freedom from worry, that are necessary for the continuation of a genius's work. If we make enough fuss, they may reason, and show enough compassionate concern that the exceptional individual should always obtain immediate and unfettered circulation for his ideas, we may create the impression that publication is the be-all and end-all

of his work, and distract attention from the question of how he is to obtain the economic means to continue it.

The discretion of Spinoza

Scientists and philosophers of the past have sometimes shown a distinct lack of urgency about seeing their works in print. Spinoza made no attempt to publish his chief work, the *Ethics*, for ten years after it was written. Three years after it was finished another philosopher, Adrian Koerbagh, was gaoled for ten years for printing opinions somewhat similar to Spinoza's and died in prison after eighteen months. No doubt incidents such as this contributed to Spinoza's discretion. When eventually Spinoza did think about publishing his book he found a rumour being spread that the forthcoming work endeavoured to prove that there is no God. Spinoza described the course of events in a letter to Oldenburg, the secretary of the Royal Society in London: 'Certain theologians (who probably were themselves the author of the rumour) took occasion upon this to lodge a complaint against me with the prince and the magistrates [. . .] Having received a hint of this state of things from some trustworthy friends, who assured me, further, that the theologians were everywhere lying in wait for me, I determined to put off my attempted publication until such time as I should see what turn affairs would take.'³⁶

However, the postponement of his scheme does not seem to have caused Spinoza any great anguish. It is true that he showed some concern lest his book should not survive him: he locked it in a desk and asked his host to deliver both the desk and its key to it to a certain Amsterdam publisher after his death. But a desire not to see the results

³⁶ Quoted in W. Durant, *Outlines of Philosophy*, Benn, 1962, pp. 147-8.

of one's work wasted is not quite the same thing as a desire to know what a large number of people think of it.

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that Spinoza achieved a certain measure of fame even though he only published two books (and one of those anonymously) during his lifetime. Evidently enough people had some idea of his views for rumours to circulate about the contents of the *Ethics*, whether these rumours were accurate or not. The offer of the chair of philosophy at Heidelberg arrived before he had even made his attempt to publish the *Ethics*; so did the offer of a royal pension from France made by the French commander-in-chief, the Prince de Condé, after his army had defeated the Dutch. Besides Oldenburg, his correspondents included the Dutch scientist Huygens and the philosopher Leibniz. He became friends with Jan de Witt, the chief magistrate of the Dutch republic, who gave him a state annuity of £10. Spinoza's life suggests that to achieve recognition in a society dominated by the concept of inherited property, and by princes and aristocrats who take an interest in learning (for whatever motive), may be a different matter from achieving it in a society dominated by such democratic institutions as the review committees of learned journals—and in some instances a less laborious one.

Scientific findings withheld or ignored

Turning to science and mathematics, we find that Newton reached the main results of his theory of gravitation by his early twenties but had to be chivvied into writing the *Principia Mathematica* nearly twenty years later. Of course, modern psychoanalysts may put this down to anal retentiveness or something of the sort; the advantage of such explanations to the modern mind is that they distract attention from the possible psychological effect of social hostility. Newton himself

claimed that one of the reasons for his reluctance to publish his scientific results was that it always led to controversy, which upset his peace of mind and slowed up his work. An explanation like this is obviously not so socially acceptable, because it might suggest the idea that less able men sometimes engage geniuses in controversy for motives other than a disinterested desire to get at the truth.

The eighteenth century physicist, Henry Cavendish, also seems to have had something other than social opinion on his mind; he left so much unpublished work that physicists were still digging up important findings in his papers a century after his death. The modern collector no doubt finds this diffidence or lack of concern about publishing most reprehensible. It may mean that other men, possibly less able, are still working hard to discover the same results generations later.

However, it is difficult to feel much sympathy with the human race on this point. It has proved so good at not recognising important original work in science, even when it is published, that scientists have frequently ‘discovered’ things that then turn out to have been achieved by some exceptional person years before. Perhaps the best known example of this is Mendel’s work in genetics; Mendel’s paper describing his results excited hardly any attention until after he was dead and until various other people had reached similar conclusions without knowing anything of his work.

XVII

Genius and Suffering – I

Different kinds of suffering

There is a popular theory that genius thrives on adversity. For example, I have heard it suggested that one reason why Beethoven was a greater composer than Mendelssohn was that Beethoven had the more cantankerous, tormented personality and made himself miserable over his deafness and his recalcitrant nephew, whereas Mendelssohn had a private income and a mutually supportive relationship with his sister.

This theory that genius is all the better for a bit of suffering may appeal particularly to believers in society, because it implies that however badly the collective treats the exceptional individual it does not really matter; in the long run it can only do him or her good.

The theory benefits from being stated in the most unanalytical way. For example, it is not suggested that there might be some kinds of suffering which were good for a genius’s output and others that were not. Consider the following passage from a book on great engineers, apparently aimed at young readers:

Whether men of the calibre of the pioneers are with us now or will emerge in the future time alone will show. Adversity and difficulty forge greatness as surely as fire tempers steel. Consequently the climate of the Welfare State and the so-called Affluent Society does not favour great men. A society which seeks to cushion its members from every ill that flesh is heir to must pay a heavy price for its philanthropy.³⁷

37 L.T.C Rolt, *Great Engineers*, Bell, London, 1962, p. 235.

It will be seen that there is not a great deal of analytical discussion in this passage of what kinds of difficulty or adversity help to forge greatness. Perhaps any kind will do. It would seem that King Ludwig and Madame von Meck come under the author's ban just as much as the Welfare State, since they certainly intended to cushion their respective protégés, Wagner and Tchaikovsky, from the ills that flesh is heir to.

Since the author in question is not going to enlighten us on which kinds of difficulty are good for genius (the passage quoted is the closing passage of his book), let us see if we can enlighten ourselves. Let us consider one of his examples, Sir Benjamin Baker, the designer of the original Forth Bridge. There were two kinds of difficulty involved in this project. The first kind was technical: the channel involved spans of more than four times the distance that had ever been spanned by a bridge before; a suspension bridge was not suitable, because the bridge had to carry trains; the bridge was to be made of steel, which had never been used in a comparable structure at that time (the 1880's), and so forth. Then there was a difficulty of another kind: the Board of Trade did not want the bridge built. The great Tay Bridge disaster had occurred shortly before, and the government had apparently become indiscriminately suspicious of all engineering projects of a certain size.

Now it is actually possible to make a distinction between difficulties that are inherent in the nature of a genius's work, and difficulties that are completely irrelevant to it and imposed from outside by the collective. It is also possible that difficulties of the first kind are a stimulant to a genius's creative powers but that difficulties of the second kind are not. For example, it is quite possible to imagine that Benjamin Baker found the technical difficulties involved in designing the biggest bridge in the world out of a relatively untried material a

challenge to his abilities. Certainly he became quite eloquent when the bridge was later attacked on aesthetic grounds by William Morris:

I have been asked why the under side of the bridge has not been made a true arc, instead of polygonal in form, and my reply is that to have made it so would have materialised a falsehood. The Forth Bridge is not an arch, and it says so for itself. No one would admire bent columns in an architectural facade, or a beam tricked out to look like an arch . . . The object has been so to arrange the leading lines of the structure as to convey an idea of strength and stability. This, in such a structure, seemed to be at once the truest and highest art.³⁸

On the other hand it is possible to imagine that the difficulty embodied by the Board of Trade, being entirely irrelevant to his abilities, caused Baker nothing but frustration, annoyance, and a reduction in his energy available for the real task in hand.

Suffering and income

It would be interesting to know what is the historical origin of the belief that suffering is good for genius. One wonders if the growth in popularity of the theory might be found to show a certain correlation with the spread of the socialist ethos. Certainly Vasari, writing in the sixteenth century, appears never to have heard of the idea; his book is sprinkled with references to the liberating effects on an artist's creativity of a plump bank balance, or its fifteenth century equivalent. Here are a few examples:

[Antonio Pollaiuolo] was a most fortunate man and led a very happy life. He had the patronage of rich pontiffs and lived when his native

³⁸ Quoted in Roll, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

city [Florence] was at the summit of its prosperity and remarkable for its love of talent. Had he lived in less favourable times he might not have produced the rich fruits which we derive from his labours, for the cares of life are the deadly enemies of that disinterested study so necessary to those who profess the arts.³⁹

The stimulating effect produced on talent by reward is known to every man who has been well paid for his work. He who can expect honour and reward feels no inconvenience, suffers no pain, admits no weariness. Every day brings new power to his talents. It is true that merit is not always fortunate in finding those able to appreciate it. But Mantegna was so exalted by a kind fate and his own abilities that though his beginnings were lowly (a shepherd on the hills), he became a knight.⁴⁰

Other pictures of about the same time are thought to be the best ever produced by Titian. He was largely rewarded by the duke [Alfonso of Ferrara]. Titian painted the duke leaning against a large cannon, and also Signora Laura, who afterward married the duke. This, too, is an admirable work. It cannot be denied that the liberality of princes is a great stimulus to the energy of those who toil for art.⁴¹

It might be argued that Vasari had a personal motive to play up the positive role of generous patrons: he was an artist himself, and a personal friend of many of the artists he describes in his book. So he had an interest in seeing that artists were well supported. Nevertheless, even if someone were to argue that he exaggerates the causal effect of increased income, this is not the same as providing evidence for the converse view: that financial adversity is positively beneficial.

39 Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, op. cit., pp. 144-5.

40 *Ibid.*, p.155.

41 *Ibid.*, p.249.

Beethoven's friend and biographer Anton Schindler likewise seems not to have heard of the theory that suffering is good for genius. Schindler was a professional violinist, at a time when classical music depended largely on the patronage of aristocratic patrons, so similar motives may have been at play as in Vasari's case; but again, even if this was the case, it does nothing to support the conventional view that financial suffering is good for genius. Having described the circumstances under which the Archduke Rudolph, Prince Lobkowitz and Prince Kinsky clubbed together to provide Beethoven with an annuity, he makes the following remarks:

The amazing productivity of the next few years [...] shows what a powerful impetus Beethoven's vigorous genius derived from this promised annuity, as the reader will soon have occasion to see for himself. It almost fulfilled the master's dearest wish that we spoke of earlier; that when he reached the autumn of his life he might resemble a tree that would shower down its ripe fruits into our laps. Truly, when one considers the number and the quality of the works composed between 1809 and 1815, one is impressed with the simile and is even tempted to think that before 1809 the fruit that the tree had brought forth had been but meager.⁴²

42 Anton Schindler, *Beethoven as I Knew Him*, ed. Donald W. MacArdle; trans. Constance S. Jolly, Faber & Faber, London, 1966, p. 154.

XVIII

Genius and Suffering – II**The myth of cold garrets**

It seems that people are liable to become quite light-headed when it comes to considering the sufferings of genius. For a start, they begin to see geniuses starving in attics where none exist (the wish is father to the thought, perhaps). For example, I once saw a letter to a daily newspaper concerning feminists who complain of the disadvantages from which they suffer as women. ‘Just remember’, the writer admonished them, ‘that Keats, who starved to death, didn’t spend his time blaming others but kept writing beautiful poetry.’⁴³

As a matter of fact starvation may have hastened Keats’s death, but if so it was not for want of money as our correspondent implies; it was because his friend Severn, who was nursing him in Rome, had the misguided idea that almost total starvation was a good treatment for someone in the terminal stages of tuberculosis. Keats may have had money troubles all his life, but they did not result in the sort of threadbare starving-in-a-garret life-style that people like to imagine for socially acceptable geniuses.

In fact Keats is a good illustration of how it was not only geniuses from the top stratum of society such as Byron and Shelley who benefitted from the capitalist system. People may like to have a romantic image of Keats as the humble son of a stable-keeper, but even Keats inherited money. If he did not benefit from the system as much as some other poets have done, this was not only because he did not inherit as

much as they, but also because the funds were not applied very efficiently by the trustees who had control of them.

Incidentally, it is not the case, as our correspondent appears to suggest, that Keats continued to compose beautiful poetry right up to the moment of his death, in heroic disregard for his lack of nourishment. He is usually said to have composed nothing during his final illness; nothing, in fact, between leaving England in the autumn of 1820 and his death in Rome in February 1821. Perhaps, after all, he felt too ill.

What is particularly picturesque about our correspondent’s vision of Keats’s final days, is the idea that he did not take time off from his busy scribbling to blame other people for their treatment of him. Actually, one gathers that during his final illness Keats was what society likes to call ‘consumed with bitterness’, inveighing against the literary world in England with a vehemence that quite alarmed his friend Severn.

Mozart’s riches

Mozart seems to be many people’s favourite example of an impoverished genius, and it is interesting to examine the sort of associations of ideas that are elicited in the average mind when it considers the discrepancy between the magnitude of his ability and the fact that he was buried in an unmarked grave. For example, I once heard a broadcast discussion in which a woman uttered words to the effect: ‘It makes my blood boil to see these modern pop singers earning so much money when you think that Mozart died in poverty’.

Now this is actually an interesting association of ideas, because it was certainly not established (or even argued) before or after this remark, that if pop singers earned less, Mozart, if he were alive today,

⁴³ Letter to *The Daily Mail*, January 7, 1977

would earn more. Instead it seems that the idea of a genius not being given his due by contemporary society was associated in this lady's mind with the idea of preventing other quite unrelated individuals from getting their hands on as much money as they could. No doubt there is an emotional logic behind this association of ideas, but I do not remember ever hearing a rational case being made out for their juxtaposition.

It is interesting to consider what other associations of ideas might occur to people. Someone might say, for example: 'It is terrible to think of Mozart being so able, and writing so much excellent music from which so many human beings have derived so much benefit over the years, and yet his not being protected from want by a grateful society. Unfortunately there is nothing I can now do to alter that particular situation. However, I want to do whatever is in my power to see that such a situation does not occur again. It may not be much, but at least I will seek out the ablest contemporary person I can find, and give him as much money as I can to prevent him from experiencing similar want.'

Instead, what seems to occur to people is something like this: 'It is awkward for one's belief in the justice and wisdom of society that there are any historical figures who manifestly did not get the recognition and support that their talent deserved. Unfortunately, these figures are historical, and there is nothing we can do to alter the facts. Still, what we can do now is to try to ensure that genius never even gets started, so individual differences cannot become apparent: we can raise personal taxation to punitive levels so that no one musician can earn more than another; we can nationalise the music industry so that in future only society will decide who gets to be called 'a musician'.'

As a matter of fact, the popular image of a poverty-stricken and unrecognised Mozart starving in a garret seems to be another example

of wishful thinking on the part of the public. A German writer⁴⁴ once estimated that at the height of his popularity in his late twenties Mozart was earning the equivalent in 1982 currency of £140,000 a year (not so very different in fact from the earning power of some of those modern pop singers who arouse such rancour in the heart of certain people who claim to have the interests of culture at heart). It is true that his earning power declined rapidly for a time thereafter, partly as a result of political and economic conditions in Austria at the time, but as late as two years before his death he was apparently still earning twice as much as the senior surgeon at a Vienna hospital, and when he died he was still employing a servant. If he was buried in an unmarked grave this may well have had more to do with the fact that he was heavily in debt than that his life-style was that of a pauper. As a matter of fact, the mere scale of his debts on his death (£40,000 in 1982 currency according to our German writer) suggests something very different from the popular image of a threadbare and neglected genius, since people are usually only able to run up debts of that magnitude if other people remained convinced (albeit erroneously) by their life-style or their apparent earning power that they will one day be able to pay them off.

Incidentally, the idea that wicked royalty was only willing to pat Mozart on the head and give him a trinket or two for the privilege of astonishing them does not seem to fit the facts very well either. According to our German author Mozart could (and did) charge kings and princes the equivalent of nearly £3,000 a time for private performances during his heyday. One cause of his eventual debts seems to have been that instead of saving out of his income while his earnings were good he gambled part of them away at billiards and cards.

44 Uwe Kramer, 'Wer hat Mozart verhungern lassen?', *Musica*, 1977.

While under the old-style capitalist system genius may often not have been as well off as it would have liked to be, it has seldom been as badly off as the human race would like. No doubt there are a few individuals in the history of the human race who have managed to achieve something of artistic or intellectual significance in a garret, but they are far fewer than the human race would like to suppose.

XIX Genius and Suffering – III

The laziness of Sibelius

Those who believe that suffering is good for genius tend to seize with avidity on any biographical morsel which might suggest that a sudden access of material good fortune had reduced an artist's productivity. For example, there is a popular idea that Sibelius was suddenly given a decent pension by the Finnish state, and proceeded not to write another note of music until his death thirty years later.

Unfortunately, this idea does not fit the facts much better than the popular idea about Mozart's poverty. Sibelius was first given a life pension by the Finnish state when he was thirty-five and had only written the first of his seven symphonies. A state pension at that age would have been on the late side for Mozart or Schubert, who died at the ages of thirty-five and thirty-one respectively. However by the standards of the human race it seems to me that the Finnish state was relatively untardy in the case of Sibelius; it has been said that he did not produce any music that we would recognise as his until he was over thirty.⁴⁵ It is true that Sibelius's pension was later increased, and that it was only in the last decades of his life that he was finally free of money troubles. However, there was no sudden, once-and-for-all improvement in his finances that exactly corresponded chronologically with the appearance of his last work. As his biographer puts it: 'Every year his situation improved - particularly after the setting up of agencies

⁴⁵ Alec Harman and Wilfrid Mellers, *Man and his Music: the Story of Musical Experience in the West*, Barrie and Jenkins, London, 1962, p. 929.

in the different European countries for the protection of royalties in respect of music.⁴⁶

Let us suppose for the sake of argument that the popular picture of Sibelius' creative life was true, which it is not. There is actually a quite different interpretation which might be put on it than that too much material good fortune makes geniuses lazy and uncreative. People might say: 'Sibelius lived to be nearly ninety-two. Therefore it is scarcely surprising that he produced nothing in the last thirty years of his life. If the Finnish state waited until he was sixty before giving him a decent pension this only goes to show that the collective only ever bestows its monetary favours on individuals who are too old to make any significant use of them.'

The hedonism of Rossini

The other composer to whom people like to refer in a knowing way in this context is Rossini. He, so the story goes, used to produce about six operas a year until he was thirty-six. Then he had the misfortune to produce a great success in *William Tell*. This made him financially independent for the rest of his life; so for the next forty years he gave up composing and devoted his life to food.

In fact Rossini did not stop composing immediately after the success of *William Tell*. He started composing his *Stabat Mater*, which he worked on for the next twelve years. Moreover Rossini was not the simple *bon viveur* that the popular image of his life history might suggest. For several years following the success of *William Tell* he was physically quite ill, and psychologically depressed. In fact according to one observer, the musicologist F.-J. Fétis, it was before he gave up composing for the theatre that Rossini had cultivated an image of

⁴⁶ Santeri Levas, *Sibelius: a Personal Portrait*, Dent, London, 1972, p. 56.

frivolity and afterwards that he became serious and reflective. Fétis wrote of a meeting he had with the composer in 1841:

. . . Rossini, very different from what he once was, now is a serious man.... I confess that I was sorrowfully struck when, upon entering his house, I saw his body so emaciated, his features aged, and I do not know what feebleness in his motions. A malady of the urinary tract, contracted many years ago, is the principal cause of this depression; the death of his father, plunging him into the most intense sorrow, finally has struck him down completely.⁴⁷

It is quite possible that Rossini himself encouraged people to think that it was simple hedonism that had made him virtually give up composing, and that he had no wish to discuss with others any more complicated psychological factors that lay behind his decision. According to a contemporary biographer, some friends called on Rossini while he was composing the *Stabat Mater* and asked him what he was doing. He rubbed his forehead and said: 'I am searching for motives, and all that comes into my mind is pastries, truffles, and such things.'⁴⁸

Fétis evidently felt that Rossini was quite capable of dissembling if he wished: '[...] If the true character of Rossini has not been known, the fault is his own,' he wrote, 'as he seems to have delighted in calumniating himself, expressing feelings that are not his and in fact taking no trouble to deny the false stories that are in circulation about him...'⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Quoted in Herbert Weinstock, *Rossini: a Biography*, Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 210.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

It is also quite possible that Rossini felt the tide of operatic fashion was turning against him soon after the success of *William Tell*. Two years later Meyerbeer had a triumph in Paris with *Robert le Diable*, which involved a large, dramatic orchestra and a correspondingly different singing style from the *bel canto* that Rossini had been involved in promoting.

I do not know what the proponents of the beneficial suffering theory make of Richard Wagner. Surely here was a case of sudden material good fortune if ever there was one. It must be very baffling to them that he ever bothered to finish *Die Meistersinger* and *Siegfried*, let alone embark on the whole of *Götterdämmerung* and *Parsifal*, once King Ludwig had started to support him.

Genius and individual differences

I mentioned in an earlier chapter that the theory that suffering is good for genius is always stated in the most unanalytical form; as far as I know it is never explained *why* intense suffering is supposed to bring out the best in exceptional individuals; it is merely asserted knowingly that great suffering and the greatest works of art have tended to go together, and the audience is left to draw the conclusion that the suffering has mysteriously caused the greatness of the work of art rather as the irritation of the oyster causes the pearl.

However, it is interesting to consider the possible implications that are not being drawn from the set of facts in question (always supposing it is a fact that genius and great suffering go together). For example, one might consider the idea that it was the capability to produce the great works of art that produced the suffering and not *vice versa*, and that this might be due to the great difficulty of achieving

anything of significance in a world inhabited by human beings, or of obtaining any sensible recognition of it once you had produced it.

Then again, one might wonder whether genius was just constitutionally prone to greater suffering than the rest of mankind, although the suffering was irrelevant to its artistic endeavours. One might consider whether people should not take special steps to protect genius from any avoidable part of that suffering to which it was prone.

With regard to Beethoven, one might consider that millions of people have gone deaf, and that not a few of them must have been musicians on whom the deafness has apparently had no beneficial effect whatsoever. One might consider whether Beethoven's assertive reaction to his deafness was not rather idiosyncratic, and hardly in keeping with the modern idea that a personal catastrophe need not be a catastrophe, because one can adapt, and if one is a musician who goes deaf, one can stop being a musician and do something else.

However, to consider any of these things might suggest Beethoven was in some way different from other people, and that this difference was constitutional rather than just the result of an exceptional set of external and social circumstances.

Perhaps the very idea of genius is disturbing to the modern mind. There is something suspiciously autonomous about the drive of some of most notable examples of the past. Beethoven, for example, shortly after writing the 'Heiligenstadt Testament', when he had been contemplating suicide on account of his growing deafness, wrote to a friend: 'I will take fate by the throat; it shall not wholly overcome me.' His remarks contain no reference to having first obtained social approval, in fact they sound as if he had come to the decision to adopt a certain psychological attitude entirely as a result of his own thinking and without consulting anyone. Surely the correct modern attitude would

be: 'I shall take fate by the throat, just as soon as I get the go-ahead from my steering committee.'

XX

The Hubris of the Collective

Collective Chutzpah

Collective entities, or rather, the people who represent them, suffer from what the Jews call *chutzpah*—a sort of unmitigated gall combined with monumental insensitivity, as exemplified by the little boy who first murders his father and mother and then goes to the Town Hall to claim a pension as an orphan.

At Eton there is not just one bust of Shelley, along with the busts of the Pitts, Porson and various other celebrated Old Etonians, but two; the second sits conspicuously in the school library, a place of distinction which no other old boy has achieved. A passing Texan might think Eton taught Shelley all he knew about poetry and was now taking the credit it deserved. In fact he is generally held to have hated the place— so much so that I have seen it suggested that this was at least partly responsible for his radical political views.

Then again, University College, Oxford, which expelled Shelley after only two terms for his pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism*, has a conspicuous shrine called the Shelley memorial, containing a life-size statue of Shelley's corpse washed up on the beach near Via Reggio. As at Eton, there is nothing comparable commemorating any other ex-member of University College.

Collective entities seem to possess a sort of moral immunity, of the kind enjoyed by children, lunatics and kings (old style). If a theatrical landlady threw a young and obscure actor out of her digs because he was slightly late with the rent or expressed the wrong political views, but later when he was famous put up a large photograph of him on her

wall and told all her visitors, “He stayed here you know”, then people would despise her as a hypocrite. But when University College does the equivalent, nobody appears to notice or mind.

Of course it may be that the college remains unconvinced of the necessity of atheism and the concomitant belief in personal mortality. Maybe it imagines Shelley looking down on it from some great empyrean Institution, seeing the Shelley memorial, and being duly placated.

I have devoted considerable thought to the question of how to prevent collective institutions gaining reflected glory from the achievements of persecuted individuals, and I have decided that the best method is for the individual to include a statement forbidding it in his or her will. I do not expect such a statement to have the slightest deterrent effect on any Institution towards which it is directed. However, this does not mean that the method should not be put into practice at every possible opportunity. The wording of wills is just as permanent as a marble bust; and the mere existence of such a will, even if it has been violated, might set up a certain psychological tension in the environment which would be good for the moral tone of the human race.

Individuals as a product of the tribe

Large-scale collective entities such as nations and tribes display the same sort of hubris with regard to the achievements of individual members as small-scale entities such as colleges and schools. I have more than once read or heard people saying: ‘It is astonishing that the German people, who produced Beethoven, could have sunk so low in following Hitler and done such terrible and uncivilised things’. Modern man apparently likes to feel that every individual is a product, not only of his own time, but of the particular tribal group into which he happens to be born.

As a matter of fact it is hard to see in what sense Beethoven could be said to be a ‘product’ of the German people, or how Germans *en masse* can take any credit for his achievements. Beethoven was supported financially by a small number of German and Austrian aristocrats—a very small number compared with the number of people who gave moral or financial support to Hitler.

Beethoven himself seems to have set no very great store by the support of the German or any other people *en masse*. “*Vox populi, vox dei*—that you will never get me to believe”, is one of his reported remarks. In musical matters, in particular, he does not seem to have had any great faith in the instinctive good judgement of the Viennese public. He was in the habit of arranging several performances of an important new work in front of a relatively small audience, selected for their favourable attitude to his genius, at the house of some aristocratic patron such as Prince Lichnowski. Only when he had thus created a favourable climate of acceptance for the new work among these select but influential few would he expose it to the mercies of people at large at a public concert.

XXI

Conclusion

Nowadays the individual patron is supposed to be redundant, the task of supporting the arts and sciences having allegedly been taken over by the collective. The modern man or woman of genius is spotted by the all-seeing and ever-wakeful eye of that numinous entity The Committee, immortal, invisible and so much more than just the sum of its parts.

Let us try to imagine the relevant member of the Arts Council, or its German equivalent, reporting to his fellow committee-members on the subject of a certain distinguished composer in, say, the year 1853

...

‘We come now to the case of Richard Wagner—as you know, a political fugitive and a wanted man in several states; however, I am sure you will agree that his political views, like his alleged anti-Semitism, are no concern of ours, responsible as we are only for assessing someone’s ability to contribute to musical culture. Also, on the question of Herr Wagner’s fabulous rudeness, of which some of you may even have had personal experience, no doubt you will all agree that this arises solely out of his uncompromising attitude to his art, and far from invalidating his musical genius, may be taken as a sign of that singleness of purpose that can only endorse our judgement in supporting his work.

‘Now last year I made it clear in my report that it was some four years since Herr Wagner had composed any music. I have to report that this situation has continued, and it is now five years since he put pen to music paper. Such a long dormancy period must encourage

you all and fill you with the same anticipatory excitement as it does me—such a long pregnancy must presage the birth of something truly tremendous.

‘Herr Wagner has not really been able to give me any indication of when he might write some more music; however, he has assured me that there is nothing he would like better than to start composing again, and I am sure we all find that most reassuring.

‘Of course I should remind the committee that our ongoing payments to Herr Wagner are not for musical expenses in the strict sense—manuscript paper, copyists’ salaries, hire of musicians and halls, etc.—since Herr Wagner is not composing any music. However, they are for his normal day-to-day living expenses such as cold-water cures, mountain-climbing expeditions and the furnishing of his Zurich flat in the idiosyncratic style he finds most conducive to his creative musical faculties. These faculties are not of course operative at present but Herr Wagner assures me that these expenditures are just what is needed to re-awaken them, and I am sure that our tax-payers with their sensitivity to the psychological requirements of genius will not find anything objectionable in the way the money is being spent.

‘Although we are strictly speaking a musical and not a literary committee I am sure you will be as pleased as I am to hear that Herr Wagner’s literary productivity, both of libretti and other works of a more general nature, continues unabated. As a matter of fact, I have seen the libretti Herr Wagner has written for the four operas he has been telling us about for some years now. Of course, they are not exactly like any libretti I have ever seen before, and I must confess it is still somewhat unclear to me how they could be set to music. But then it is not we who have to compose the operas, is it gentlemen? It is not for us to attempt to anticipate the mind of such an original genius. Ours is but to follow patiently in his footsteps and try by every means

THE ABOLITION OF GENIUS

at our disposal to smooth the path in front of him. His eyes are fixed on a distant star; our role is to see that his feet do not stumble on the rocky path of day-to-day existence.

‘As you know, Herr Wagner is somewhat given to negative thinking about the artistic world as presently constituted, and he still assures me that no theatre in the world will be able to stage his four operas if and when they are completed. However, ours is a most sacred trust and holy duty to art: to support unquestioningly the individual genius; and I am sure you will agree with me that we should encourage Herr Wagner to continue with his project no matter how unlikely it is that it will ever reach the wider public.

‘I see by your show of hands that I have your unanimous support and approval for our continued financial payments ...’