

Liberal Reflections

by
Michael C O'Dowd

FMF Occasional Paper No. 4

First published in **December 1999** by **The Free Market Foundation**

PO Box 785121, Sandton 2146, South Africa

Telephone: (011) 884 0270

Fax: (011) 884 5672

Email: fmf@lia.co.za

Website: www.freemarketfoundation.com

© The Free Market Foundation 1999

FMF Occasional Paper No. 4

All rights reserved

ISBN: 1-874930-33-3

Contents

Foreword

The author

Chapter 1

Trading for profit

Chapter 2

What is truth?

Chapter 3

All being wrong together

Chapter 4

Who are the progressives now?

Chapter 5

Everything is relative – but relative to what?

Chapter 6

Freedom is the precondition of progress

Chapter 7

The fallacy of Social Darwinism

Chapter 8

The two kinds of competition

Foreword

FMF *Occasional Papers* are designed to make available to a wider audience essays on particular matters of moment or currency.

In the last decade communism has collapsed, *apartheid* has crumbled, and socialism has become a cause without a future. What can fill the moral vacuum? Capitalism has triumphed – and done so unequivocally. Yet capitalism is totally amoral. It is simply a social environment where economic laws need not be distorted. We now know from history what was always known from economics, that mankind is materially richer under capitalism than under any alternative state.

And yet ... man cannot live by bread alone. Now that the socialist religion has flopped capitalism is unable to fill the vacuum. The reason is obvious, capitalism is exclusively economic, socialism presumed to be both moral and economic. In this *Paper*, Michael O'Dowd provides some thoughts on capitalism's essential hand-maiden – liberalism.

Those who look for a "third way" other than capitalism or socialism/communism, are deluded. Rather they should seek the missing element of socialism's antithesis. Capitalism is not an alternative to socialism. But liberal capitalism is.

What then is liberalism? How is it morally linked to capitalism? How do the two, when merged, fill the vacuum left by the demise of socialism? The answer is important. Materialism without morality contains the seeds of its own destruction. The paradox is that capitalism delivers. But delivery without an ethos of inbuilt respect for the individual leads quickly to policy making arrogance. Politicians are impatient. They soon come to believe we could do even better if we could ignore the annoying idiosyncrasies of people on the ground. So begins intervention in the market process. All in the name of the "public interest", of course. And soon – despite the lessons of history – we walk again down the road to socialism.

Whether it is Mr Blair's "third way", Mr Schroeder's "middle path", Mr Mbeki's "renaissance" or Mr Clinton's "feeling our pain" the issue is the same. Each is seeking for some moral complement to capitalism. Each approach, if given free rein – could help jettison the triumph of capitalism and its material benefits. Each would return us to discredited, poverty-enhancing socialism. We would then *unwittingly forfeit the greatest of all benefits of the last decade*, namely the increase in individual freedom.

This is the great contribution made by Michael O'Dowd in the reflective essays in this *Occasional Paper*.

O'Dowd is an eclectic. He writes in the tradition of millennia of *philosophes* – from Aristotle and Confucius, through Judaeo-Christianity, to the Open Society of Karl Popper. Enriched with allusions from literature and history, O'Dowd's *Paper* demonstrates how liberal capitalism provides the only material environment where both the human mind and spirit can achieve their highest aspirations.

Chapter 1 uses the parable of the talents to demonstrate the necessity of and moral appropriateness of work, trade and exchange. Chapter 2 argues, that while human action (such as trade) is always carried out within a framework of knowledge, our knowledge is never complete. To believe otherwise too easily leads to impatient governments coercing individuals to agree with such a false, alternative belief. (Chapter 3 recalls Galileo and the Inquisition, and Plato and the *Republic* to illustrate such use of central force.)

Chapter 4 continues looking at such "coercion", but shows how that word was transmuted by self-styled "progressives" such as Marx, Lenin and Hitler. Marx, less dishonest than some, called for a trade-off between individual freedom and material well-being. That trade-off, history has shown, is unnecessary. Indeed (Chapter 6) drawing on the history of poetry, sculpture and other arts, O'Dowd shows individual freedom is a prerequisite for creativity.

Creativity, change, advance and evolution is best promoted by individuals, not mandated from the top (Chapter 5). Dichotomous change is traumatic, and if wrong is wholly wrong (although as O'Dowd points out those at the top have no incentives to avoid being wholly wrong – Stalin and Mao did not starve when their policies forced hunger on their citizens). Gradual and diffuse change

can be appropriate or inappropriate but is more likely to be optimal most of the time. For one, wrong directions of social change can be rapidly reassessed. Meantime appropriate advances continue. While the knowledge of where and how to take decisions is, as already noted, both incomplete and dispersed. Optimal decision making is then also dispersed, not concentrated in Pretoria, Washington or Moscow. To believe otherwise, of course, not only courts the dangers of socialism but also the evils of ill-founded feelings of cultural superiority (Chapter 7). Ancient Greeks wrote off Macedonians, Romans the barbaric Germans, Europeans the Japanese, Chinese the Koreans, and most close to home, we had *apartheid*. Yet biological explanations of progress and economic evolution fall when prejudice is removed. People with the same cultures and the same ethnic backgrounds perform with enormous differences, under capitalism and socialism (West and East Germany, North and South Korea, Taiwan/Hong Kong/Singapore and mainland China, Indians in the Diaspora and Indians who live in India – the list goes on).

But different performances mean arriving at results closer to, or further from the “winning post”. It is all about competition (Chapter 8). Yet O’Dowd argues, absent socialism, there are no “losers” in economic competition. Unlike sporting competition, one need hardly be aware of one’s competitors. The important other parties are those one cooperates with, not those one competes with. Trade and exchange involve cooperation and mutual benefit. It is customers and suppliers we deal with. Unlike sporting competition where competitors are in close contact (often brutally – take rugby or boxing), with economic cooperation we are working for others but motivated by the commendable urge not to leave our talents buried in the ground.

The FMF is happy to recommend these *Liberal Reflections* to both liberals and others. The *mores* of free market capitalism can readily form a *troika* with spiritual values and intellectual ideals. Michael O’Dowd’s essays make this point clearly. Neither the FMF (which has no corporate view) nor its Directors, members or staff, necessarily agree with each and every aspect of O’Dowd’s reasoning. Nevertheless, we believe these *Reflections* make for both an enjoyable and a profitable read.

W. Duncan Reekie

Bradlow Professor

University of the Witwatersrand

Publications Editor, FMF

The author

Michael Conway O'Dowd was born in 1930 in Johannesburg and educated at the University of the Witwatersrand from where he graduated with a BA and LL.B *cum laude*. He received the honorary degrees of Doctor of Social Science from the University of Natal, Doctor of Laws from the University of the Witwatersrand, and Doctor of Laws from Rhodes University.

In 1974 he was appointed Chairman of the Anglo American and De Beers Group Chairman's Fund – a position he held until 1997. He is Chairman of the Free Market Foundation, a member of the Human Sciences Research Council, and a Fellow of the Institute of Directors.

Chapter 1

Trading for profit

The parable of the talents

For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods.

And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one: to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey.

Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made them other five talents.

And likewise he that had received two, he also gained other two.

But he that had received one went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money.

After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them.

And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained besides them five talents more.

His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.

He also that had received two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents besides them.

His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.

Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed:

And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine.

His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed:

Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury.

Mathew 25, 14-27

The same story is told, with only trifling differences, in Luke 19, 12-27.

Most Christian churches, for reasons that had little to do with the teachings of Jesus Christ and much to do with the economic interest of their leaders, have been hostile to trade, have disapproved of profit and have particularly disapproved of the lending of money at interest. Yet here we have, in the very words of the Master, what appears to be a glowing affirmation of trading for profit as an admirable activity, success in which earns both praise and material reward, while lending money at interest is shown as an acceptable second best option for those who are unable to trade. What are we to make of this?

Those who have been embarrassed by this passage (and they have been many), have hastened to point out that it is a parable. It is a metaphor, to convey a spiritual message not a lecture on economics. This is true. The passage opens with the words "The kingdom of heaven is as ...". It is about the kingdom of heaven, and its meaning lies beyond what appears on the surface of the story. I do not deny this for a moment, nor do I have any problem with the traditional orthodox interpretation of the meaning, which is that the parable teaches us that each of us must make the utmost use of whatever capacities or abilities he or she possesses. It is from this interpretation that the common meaning of the word 'talent' as in 'he has a talent for music' is derived.

Nevertheless, while fully agreeing that the parable is not a lecture on economics, I contend that it does indeed tell us something, in fact a great deal, about its narrator's attitude towards some questions of economics.

A parable is a kind of metaphor, as we have already noticed; it compares one thing with another, normally something which is well known and easy to understand with something else which is more difficult. The simplest form of this type of use of language is the simile either expressed as when we say 'he runs like a hare', 'he fought like a lion', 'he eats like a pig', or implied, as when we simply call someone a lion or a pig. Now, the whole point of these comparisons is that they refer to the actual known (or assumed) characteristics of real things, and what is more, they invoke a whole set of attitudes and emotions that are associated with those things. Lions are not merely assumed to be strong and brave, they are admirable. Pigs are assumed to be dirty and greedy, and they are despicable. If we do not believe these things – whether they are true or not – the simile is pointless, and so we today have difficulty with traditional comparisons with dogs ('treat him like a dog', 'a dog's life') because they imply an attitude to dogs which we do not share.

The crucial point is that most simple similes and far more elaborate and extended metaphors, depend on much more than a single simple correspondence of one characteristic, like 'quick as lightning'. Much more usually, as in the lion and pig examples, they involve a broad correspondence in emotional attitude, in values between the two things that are compared. While this is not quite always true – there are examples like 'quick as lightning' – what is always true without exception is that there is never actual dissonance between the emotional aura of the two things compared. It is unthinkable that anybody should ever use something which he regards as despicable as a symbol for something which he regards as noble, nor something which he regards as evil as a symbol for something which he regards as good.

We can see this point illustrated again and again in the parables of the New Testament. The parable of the sower would be incomprehensible if we did not automatically regard sowing as an activity of vital importance. The parable of the Good Shepherd (and indeed all the references to shepherds) would be meaningless if we did not regard sheep as both attractive and useful animals and shepherds as rather admirable people. One only has to contemplate the possibility of the Good Goatherd or the Good Swineherd to see the point. In our culture the Good Dog-owner would do very well but in the culture of the New Testament it would not have done. We are told not to throw pearls before swine, not before sheep. The prodigal son is reduced to caring for swine, not to caring for sheep, and so on for as long as you like.

What is the application of this to the parable of the talents? The basis of the story is the simple assumption, as obvious as that sowing is important and that sheep are useful and attractive, that trading for profit is an honourable and desirable activity, success in which deserves both praise and material reward, and that it is a fit symbol for the pursuit of spiritual growth, or however else exactly we interpret the real meaning of the parable. That Jesus thought otherwise (or indeed expected his hearers to think otherwise) is as impossible as that he thought that sheep were unclean or that shepherds were scoundrels.

The remark about lending money at interest (which occurs also in St Luke's version), although it comes over as rather 'throw away', is still an essential part of the story. The 'unprofitable servant' was not condemned for not having made the best possible use of his talents. A second best would have been accepted, though obviously the reward would have been less. The assumption that lending money at interest is a proper thing and in some circumstances a positive duty, is perfectly plain and clear.

If these assumptions were in any way perverse we would have reason to be puzzled by them, but, on the contrary, they reflect a perfect understanding of the economic process. The active entrepreneurial use of wealth in collaboration with others (for that is what 'trading' implies) creates both wealth for those who do it (hence the reward to the 'good and faithful servants') but also creates widespread benefits for other people, contributing to the general welfare (hence the 'joy of the Lord'). Those who cannot undertake entrepreneurship can still make their contribution by

placing their assets at the disposal of those who can, and the institution of lending at interest exists precisely to make this possible.

Is not the parable saying that just as the active and conscientious use of material assets in collaboration (trade) creates wealth both for those who do it and for others, so the active development of spiritual gifts in interaction with others enriches those who do it and enriches others as well. Furthermore, just as those who leave material assets idle do not merely remain as they are but are actually impoverished, so those who neglect their abilities actually deteriorate. Finally, the fact that what would have been the best option is closed to one is not an excuse for doing nothing. There are always second-best alternatives available.

How are we to reconcile this unequivocal approval of trading for profit with the equally unequivocal call to certain people to give all to the poor and follow me? We can do so very easily, just as we can reconcile the call to certain people to celibacy with the affirmation of marriage (both are found among other places, in Matt. 19). Any doctrine which is seriously meant to be followed as a rule of life must take cognisance of the fact that different people have to fulfil different roles. For everybody to 'give everything to the poor' and become wandering preachers would be the shortest way to ensure that everybody, very much including the poor, starved to death; but some people, like the twelve apostles but not only they, did leave everything and follow Jesus, and He certainly considered that what they did was of the uttermost value.

In recognising that different people have to fulfil different roles we have to recognise too that certain roles are incompatible with each other. Those who take on the role of wandering preachers cannot also marry or be property owners, not only because marriage and property will interfere with their preaching but perhaps more importantly because the life of a wandering preacher makes them unable to fulfil the obligations of a husband or wife or a property owner.

The image of the careful, conscientious property owner is presented with obvious approval in many places in the New Testament for example:

There was a certain householder who planted a vineyard and hedged it round about and digged a wine-press in it, and built a tower. (Matt. 21-23)

Every scribe who is instructed into the Kingdom of heaven is like a certain man who is a householder who bringeth forth from his treasure things old and new which he has carefully preserved, or created, as the scribe preserves old knowledge and creates new. (Matt. 13-57)

In contrast the figure of the rich men who are held up to condemnation in the parables are all people who squander their assets and use them entirely selfishly. The prodigal son 'wasted his substance in riotous living' (Luke 15-13). He is proposing to go one worse than to bury his talent; he is proposing to consume it. The rich man in the story of Lazarus is condemned for his selfishness. He could easily have succoured Lazarus but he did not do so.

There is one last problem. How do we reconcile the approval of trading for profit with the expulsion of the traders from the temple? This, too, is not difficult. Jesus Christ explained his actions in the matter in the following words: "Is it not written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer but you have made it a den of thieves." There are two complaints against the traders here. One is that the temple is not the proper place for trading; the other that the traders are dishonest.

It seems likely that the two points were linked; that the traders, under some sort of franchise from the temple, had a monopoly on the supply of sacrificial animals which would be accepted in the temple, and of the supply of the particular coinage that was acceptable for offering to the temple. If this was so, it is not surprising that the traders exploited the pilgrims, and it is very probable that the temple itself shared in the proceeds. If this was so, then so far from being an attack on trading the expulsion was a blow for free trade, but whether it was or not, it is perfectly clear that to condemn dishonest trading is not to condemn trading as such.

So, we see that the countenancing of honest, conscientious and constructive trading which the early Protestants (and some Catholic theologians too, at about the same time) found in the new Testament is indeed there.

Chapter 2

What is truth?

In the era which is now just past, the era of modernism, it was fashionable to exaggerate how much we knew, and with what degree of certainty. While the leading scientists generally did not share this view the man in the street was led to believe, indeed was quite specifically taught at school and in undergraduate studies at university, that science had essentially explained everything. All that remained was to fill in a few gaps, while driving knowledge into ever remoter depths of time and space.

Recently we have come to realise that all this is not true. While science has provided amazingly clear and simple expositions of some aspects of reality, others, and important ones, remain almost untouched. In addition some of our much loved theories turn out to have been inaccurate and the new ones that are taking their place are far less simple and elegant. Above all it has been realised that the attempts to apply science to human behaviour and the management of human society have not only failed but have done harm, sometimes on a gigantic scale.

Against this background we see a revival of the philosophy known as scepticism, which says that we do not really know anything. This position is very ancient. It is both affirmed (up to a point) and attacked by Plato in different dialogues, and it had a strong following in ancient times, both before and after Plato. It tends to surface in human history from time to time, always in reaction to a period of excessive dogmatism.

The trouble with scepticism is that nobody really believes it in the sense (surely the only meaningful sense) of basing his everyday life on it. A good start to any argument with a sceptic is to ask him what his contingency plan is in case the sun does not rise tomorrow morning or (one can add instances ad nauseam) in case gravity switches off or all the water in the world disappears. Has he provided for his old age in case he lives to be two hundred? If he says you are talking nonsense, you reply, "But how do you *know* I am talking nonsense?"

There is a famous story along the lines concerning the Italian economist Pareto. He was attending a conference of economists where he became personally friendly with a German economist whom we will call Dr Schmidt. Dr Schmidt belonged to the German Historical School that denied that there are any laws of economics. All an economist can do is to describe what happened in particular situations in the past. Pareto disagreed with this view.

One evening Dr Schmidt suggested that they should go out to dinner. "By all means," said Pareto. "Let's find a restaurant where they are giving the food away for nothing." "Don't be silly," said Dr Schmidt. "Restaurants don't give away food for nothing." "Oh," said Pareto. "You mean there *are* laws of economics?"

There is an additional point to this story that is not often noticed. If Pareto contended that there was a law of nature (like the law of gravity) that restaurants do not give away food for nothing he was wrong. It was perfectly possible that some restaurant was giving food away for nothing as an advertisement or for charity, but the likelihood was so low that searching for it would certainly have been a waste of their time. What Pareto said (or implied) was true enough for practical purposes.

Indeed, we have to distinguish very clearly between what was known *for* certain and what was known *to be* certain. We can know with a great degree of certainty that something is very improbable but possible (like snow in Johannesburg in October), or very likely but not certain (like a commercial aircraft completing a flight without an accident). Sometimes we can calculate with great accuracy just how probable or improbable the uncertainty is. Insurance and life assurance companies base their whole business on doing this, and generally they are successful.

There *are* things we know for certain, or so nearly as makes absolutely no difference. We know the sun will rise tomorrow at a certain time, which can be calculated with great accuracy. We know that we will not live to be two hundred. We know that gravity and electricity and many other things will continue to act according to the laws that we also know. We base our lives on this knowledge. We have no contingency plan in case it proves to be wrong. We bet our lives on it every

day. Whatever philosophers say, ordinary people (and that actually includes the philosophers when they are doing anything other than philosophising) know that they know.

There are areas of uncertainty that are still there, this we also know. We know limits and we know probabilities. Although the unpredictability of the weather is notorious, its broad patterns are very predictable. We know the difference between summer and winter. We know the difference between wet seasons and dry seasons. We know the difference between one climate and another. We know for certain (talking about the present time, not the geologically remote past or future) that degrees of cold which are perfectly normal in Russia will never occur in Johannesburg. We know that even in the years of the most acute drought some rain will fall in Johannesburg in December while it is very likely, in any year, that none will fall in July. Living with probability, calculating risks, recognising limits, is very largely what everyday life is about. Science may not be very helpful in these areas, but we know how to do this because we do it every day.

So some things we know for certain, or so nearly certain that it makes no difference to anything. We know that none of us will live to be two hundred; we know when the sun will rise tomorrow, to the second; we know the melting point of ice and the boiling point of water; and we know that aeroplanes can fly. Other things we know to be unpredictable, but we know with some confidence the limits within which they move, like the weather. Others we know to be totally unpredictable, but we know how they average out over time, like the spin of a coin or the behaviour of the roulette wheel.

There are other things that we know very little about. We have some information and from this we have formulated guesses as to the things which we do not know. These are, or include, the scientific theories which are formulated in the areas where we have little information, like the depth of space and time, and the behaviour of sub-atomic particles (if they exist – or if they do not, whatever does exist in their place). Here our knowledge is so incomplete that it can happen that a single discovery makes it necessary to revise the theory completely, so that a great many things that we formerly thought likely are suddenly discarded altogether.

When this happens it encourages some people to say, “So you see, we know nothing.” This is an unfortunate consequence of a tendency of the popularising of science to fail to draw a distinction between the areas where scientific theories are extremely well grounded and the areas where they are quite tenuous. We may wake up one morning to find that there are no such things as quasars or that black holes are not what we thought, or that the redward shift has quite a new explanation but we will not wake up one morning to find that ice melts at 10°C.

It is very important in this connection always to remember that fact precedes theory. We base our theories on the facts that we know. Then we deduce other facts that must also be so if the theory is right, and go out to test whether the secondary facts are so or not. If they are not, we have to revise the theory, but the new theory still has to accommodate the original facts, which have not changed. It is a widespread but fundamental fallacy to think that facts change when theories change. The day before Copernicus published his theory that the earth moved round the sun, and the day after, the earth moved in exactly the same way, the sun appeared to rise at exactly the predicted time. Nothing changed except what a few (at the time, very few) astronomers believed.

At something about this point a philosopher usually intervenes to say “But how do you *know* that you know these things?” There is no water-tight answer to this. Since the first sceptics of Ancient Greece (or probably long before) nobody has been able to put scepticism to rest. Yet scepticism suffers from one massive drawback, namely that nobody, not even the declared sceptics, behaves consistently, or even usually, as if it was true.

While philosophical debate has swayed back and forth through the ages, all science, and nearly all everyday life, has been based on a set of assumptions about reality and truth. These assumptions cannot be proved, but they can certainly be said to have worked. They are as follows:

1. There is a reality that is external to us and exists irrespective of us. It is determined neither by what is known of it nor by what may be wished of it. It existed before we did and will exist after we have gone.

2. This reality works in its own way, not ours. We can, to some extent change or control it but only by doing the right thing, in its terms. Our virtues do not matter. Our good or bad intentions do not matter. What matters is to know what to do, and to do it exactly right.

These two sets of assumptions are not only basic to all modern science and modern everyday behaviour. They are common also to nearly all pre-modern sets of beliefs. It matters not which religion or mythology we look at, we will find these same points in one form or another. God or the gods, or the spirits exist outside us. They are greater than we are and more powerful. They existed before we did (this point is always insisted upon). They act according to their own wills, not ours. They are merciless if we cross them. We can influence them, but in order to do so we have to know exactly what to do, and we have to get it right. Mythology is full of the point that there is no mercy for those who make mistakes, however innocently.

We may recall the myths of Orpheus who was told not to look back, Adam and Eve who were told not to eat the fruit, Pandora who was told not to open the box. Modern people often feel that these myths are unreasonably hard but this is because they think that the myths are about the dealing of human beings among themselves whereas they are in fact about the dealing of human beings with what we call inanimate nature. If you think the myths are 'hard' try looking back while you are driving at high speed on a winding road, try eating mushrooms that you have been told not to eat, try opening a box containing high voltage electrical equipment. In the myths the people had been warned, but it does not help if you did not know. In the myth of the Waste Land, the knight struck the 'blow dolorous which laid waste four countries' entirely innocently. He had no way of knowing what he was doing. Well, you can trigger an avalanche or start a forest fire entirely innocently, but it will harm/trap/injure you just the same and do the damage that it is going to do just as much as if it had been started with the utmost of calculated malice.

The difference between modern and pre-modern thinking does not turn on any of the points in our two propositions. It turns on the extent to which we believe that day-to-day occurrences are under the control of external beings. In modern thinking either there is no god, or it is believed that God created a world which operates according to objective principles and that God either never intervenes in matters of detail or has done so only on a handful of quite extraordinary occasions. Most pre-modern people believed that god or the gods or the spirits controlled natural events and phenomena in detail and from day to day, but this did not mean, in most systems of belief, that people could not, up to a point and with the permission of the gods or spirits (which had to be obtained in the right way) predict or control natural events. Rain-making rituals are a case in point.

There is a third assumption, on which there was much less unanimity, and it remains controversial in modern thinking, and opinions on it vary in earlier sets of beliefs. The assumption is that the external truth is knowable to some extent by human beings. The controversial issue is how far it is knowable. Some of the more elaborate and dogmatic religions and philosophies (such as Platonism) have held that to those who are in the know, who have access to the proper source of knowledge, everything that matters is knowable, and indeed known in the utmost detail. Modernist scientists tended to take a similar view that everything is knowable, and that a great deal is already known.

Other religions and philosophies have emphasised the difficulty of knowing for certain, have questioned how much is knowable, or firmly asserted that all sorts of things are unknowable. God, or the gods are inscrutable and unpredictable. Knowledge is partial and uncertain. Post-modern scientists and philosophers tend to this view.

It is in relation to the recognition (which is valid) that some of our knowledge is inexact, and that there are things that, at least for the present, we cannot know, that it is important to hold firm to our basic assumption, even if we cannot know the truth, the truth is still there, and of course, one day we may be able to know it. Before telescopes and microscopes were invented whole worlds of which we now have detailed knowledge were completely closed to our ancestors. They guessed about their theories, about the causes of disease, for example, and about the nature of the universe,

and we now know, *we know* that many of their guesses were very wrong indeed. We also know that, especially in relation to the cause of disease, this mattered very much.

We quite often hear nowadays, “There is your truth and there is my truth. It is all a matter of point of view.” So, is there Pasteur’s truth – that certain diseases are caused by bacteria, and somebody else’s truth – that they are caused by evil spirits? There are not. We *know* that Pasteur is basically right. Of course we now know still more that Pasteur did not know. Is there Ptolemy’s truth – that the sun goes round the earth, and Galileo’s truth – that the earth goes round the sun, and you can take your pick? No. We *know* that Ptolemy was wrong and Galileo essentially right. If we want to send a rocket to Mars this matters. If we based our plan for the rocket on Ptolemy’s model of the solar system it would most assuredly not arrive.

What we know is not, in fact, the truth. It is an idea created in our minds from our sense-data and our calculations that approximate, more or less closely to the truth. In some areas our knowledge is probably as near perfect as can make no difference; in others it is very approximate indeed; but in all cases we hold firm to the belief, or the assumption which makes sense of the whole scientific project, as well as of much of everyday life. Even the things that we can never know – or rather that we assume at present that we can never know – are there.

Although post-modernist scepticism is at present being overdone, as scepticism has been overdone in other periods in the past, we must not subject it to blanket condemnation. There are two lines of thought that can have the effect of retarding or even preventing the search for the truth, that is, the project to approximate our ideas more and more closely to the actual truth. The one is indeed exaggerated scepticism – the denial that there is anything to know or that we can ever know it, but that is not the most dangerous. The most dangerous and the one that has in fact been most damaging to the search for truth is the dogmatic claim that we already know everything or that we know all that is possible for us to know or all that is proper for us know. The totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century adopted this attitude in its entirety and actively persecuted the pursuit of truth outside of their own strait-jacket, but even in the relatively free world of modernist thinking went much too far in this direction. A reaction is due, and although like all reactions, it is being overdone, it is better than what preceded it.

As always, we have to accept less than perfection. We know nothing perfectly and we know nothing absolutely for certain. But we know a great deal for as near certain as makes no difference, and a great deal more with sufficient certainty for the knowledge to be useful. In fact it is knowledge and practically nothing else which makes us live so much longer and so much better than our ancestors did. It is our most valuable possession, so to preserve and extend it is one of our most urgent tasks.

Chapter 3

All being wrong together

He who controls the present controls the past,

He who controls the past controls the future.

George Orwell

In spite of the general assumption in the essay, *What is truth?* that there is an external reality which does not yield to our wishes and is not affected by our beliefs, there is a persistent undercurrent of belief or half-belief that if only everybody, without exception, agreed that something was so, then it would in fact be so. In a general form, this idea is absurd. For thousands of years, probably hundreds of thousands, every single human being believed that the sun rotated round the earth. Does that mean that it actually did? If so, when did it stop? When one person suggested that the earth might go round the sun? When one person became convinced that it did? When the majority of people believed that it did, or when everybody did so? When half the people believed one thing and half the other, what did the poor sun do? It is no use saying, "There is my sun and your sun," because we know perfectly well that there is only one sun, that it is as it is, and that if I act on false beliefs about how it is, I will suffer the consequences.

Until we get involved in space travel the practical consequences of 'how the sun is' are not important for most people, but there are other areas when the facts are very important indeed and where universal but wrong beliefs did not help at all. One of the most obvious is the cause and treatment of disease. For thousands of years it was believed that blood-letting was an effective cure for fever, and following the belief large numbers of people were treated and notwithstanding the belief, they died. Recently other methods of treatment were found and as a result people now live longer. If command or common belief could make truth, all diseases would have been treated successfully at all times and there would have been no increase in the expectation of life over the last hundred years.

There is, of course, one rather important area of reality that does not respond to human wishes and beliefs and that is human behaviour. If it is only human behaviour that we are concerned with, to create a universal belief may well be effective. The trouble is, however, that nearly all human behaviour involves interacting with non-human reality so that behaviour based on false beliefs quite simply does not work. The Black Death could not have been prevented by making everybody believe that the plague was prevented by eating garlic. At least this would have done no harm, but if it was believed, as in some places it was, that the way to combat plague was to kill off all the cats, the belief could do great harm, the more harm the more it was actually acted upon.

The issue is complicated by two things that exist extensively in human society. The one is arbitrary convention and the other is traditional myth.

Arbitrary conventions are very common. They arise when it is desirable, or in some cases vitally necessary, that everybody should act according to the same rule, but it does not matter what the rule is as long as there is one. A perfect example is the rule of the road. There is absolutely no advantage in driving on the left side of the road rather than the right, nor vice versa, but it is literally life and death that everybody should drive on the same side. Hence there is no objective fact or state of affairs that has to be ascertained. All that is necessary is that everybody should agree.

Societies are full of arbitrary conventions, many of which are much more subtle in their purpose than the rule of the road. The purpose that they all serve, in many different ways, is to enable people to know in advance what behaviour they can expect and, more important, what behaviour they can be sure of not getting from other people. Beyond the rule of the road, there are subtle conventions in driving which differ from one town to another, giving rise to the near-universal perception that people from other places do not know how to drive. It is small differences in manners and conventions of behaviour between one society and another that give rise to the stress and anxiety associated with travelling in foreign countries, sometimes called 'culture shock'.

Arbitrary conventions are extremely widespread and completely necessary, but properly speaking they should have nothing to do with this enquiry. The reason why they cause confusion is that it is quite common, and used to be much more so, to teach the arbitrary conventions of society to children as if they were cosmic truths and not to distinguish between rules based on social convention and rules based on prudential consideration of the facts of external reality. Is 'wash your hands before eating' a social convention or a prudential act to protect oneself against infection? In fact it is both, and so are a great many others.

Many conventions are not truly arbitrary. It is highly desirable, from the point of view of your personal health, always to wash your hands before eating. By making it a convention so that everybody expects everybody else to do it, it is made easier. Everybody accords to everybody else the reasonable space to do it. It is also made more difficult not to do it.

These kinds of conventions shade into the area of traditional myths. These played a very important role in earlier societies and exist in our own society much more than we often like to think. They consist in a convention that serves an important social purpose, supported by a story which is factually untrue, which give a sanction to the convention. So, for example, in a traditional society there is a taboo on cutting living wood, which serves the extremely important purpose of preventing the deforestation of the countryside. The taboo is sanctioned by a story that the spirits of the trees will avenge themselves on anyone who cuts living wood.

Much of what our immediate ancestors pleased to call 'superstition' was of this kind, and in order to understand it we have to accept two points that the modernist rationalists do not like. The first is that people have discovered by experience what works and what does not work without having a valid theoretic base for their knowledge. 'Primitive' people knew a great deal that was true without knowing why it was true. The other point is that over time natural selection sorted out ways of behaviour that worked better from those that worked worse, and it is the better ones that survive. Patterns of behaviour that have survived for a long time are certainly serving a purpose and while there may be better ways, we need to be sure we have identified these before we attack such patterns.

As long as things remain unchanged these myth-backed conventions serve useful purposes, but their drawback is that they stand in the way of change. When new discoveries or changed circumstances make it possible and desirable to change the convention, the myth stands in the way.

The very purpose of the myth is to make change in the convention impossible. (This may not be its *only* purpose but that is another story.) This is important since the conventions will always require behaviour which is in some way burdensome, usually involving the sacrifice of short-term to long-term interests, such things as not eating seed-corn or slaughtering draught animals or breeding stock or enforcing all the complex requirements around the proper care of the young.

Modernist reformers hated these myths because they stood in the way of change, denounced them as 'irrational', called them 'superstitious', and demanded that they be 'swept away'. Reason was to take their place. All rules of behaviour were to be tested by conscious reason and only conventions which were justified by reason were to have any force.

This was all very well up to a point. As the world changed under the impact of new knowledge and new technology social behaviour did have to change (as it has done, vastly). 'Superstition' did sometimes stand in the way of changes that would definitely be beneficial, for example in preventing or curing disease.

However, the rationalist approach ran into no less than three problems. The first was that the rational reformers did not always know what they were doing. In general, they did not know as much as they thought they did. Typically, they would focus their attention on one aspect only of a convention of behaviour which was often much more complex than they had realised and served not one purpose but many. They were forever throwing out babies with bathwater, giving rise to the now familiar phenomenon of social reform producing new social evils.

The second problem was that reason is not as simple and cogent as rationalists liked to believe. The idea that was still being seriously put forward just a few years ago that if only everybody would embrace reason, everybody would agree on all essentials, is just not true. One of

the main consequences of their replacement of 'superstition' with 'reason' has been the breakdown of social uniformity. The old conventions have not been replaced by a new rational one but by a multiplicity of new conventions or by none. Indeed the most striking difference between a 'modern' society and a 'traditional' one is the far larger areas in which individuals are free to make their own choices.

In many areas this change, whether or not it was intended by anybody, has been highly beneficial. As societies have become richer, with more resources, so having bigger margins against misfortune and disaster, it has become increasingly less necessary to insist on uniformity of behaviour and therefore possible to reap the advantage of not doing so. These consist not only, or even primarily in the lifting of the burden which compelled conformity placed on individuals; even more important is the scope which individual freedom creates for experimentation and the competition of different ways of doing things which is the main engine of progress in any society. Throughout history relatively free societies have always progressed more and faster than unfree ones.

Nevertheless, there is a price to be paid for this that accounts to a large extent for the widespread disillusionment with modernism that we see in the contemporary world. This links up with the third problem of rational reform of behaviour, namely that reason fails to give people adequate motives to defer immediate gratification for the sake of the long term, and to subordinate the interests of each individual to those of all other individuals, which is the proper way of regarding the concept of the individual versus society. Reason teaches each individual that by being sufficiently clever and unscrupulous, he or she can get away with behaviour that, if practised by everybody, would be totally destructive. It is not for nothing that Shakespeare's most extreme villains, Iago in *Othello* and Edmund in *King Lear*, are both rationalists.

Hence, very largely, came the discontent of modern society. Everybody, or at least too many people, were trying to live off 'society'. "Live now, present a bill to 'society' later". Governments, in trying to appear to meet these demands and not to present the bill for them, were loading burdens onto future generations or, quite simply, preparing future bankruptcy. The equivalent of seed corn *was* being consumed; the young were *not* being adequately cared for; and large numbers of people were damaging themselves through their unwillingness to take the long-term consequence of their behaviour into account.

This now brings us back to our starting point, for as we have become disillusioned with rationalism there has been a revival of the question: Is it possible to create myths as a way of influencing human behaviour? The idea is not a new one. Plato, in *The Republic* specifically recommends that rulers should create myths and that these should be based on false information. Plato, too, lived in a time and place when traditional conventions of behaviour were breaking down under the impact of change and reason, and when people were worried about some of the consequences of this breakdown.

In a situation where the inadequacy of reason is becoming evident people may revert to *old* beliefs – be they myths or not – as is happening in many parts of the world in the movements which are sometimes called 'fundamentalist', but it is very unlikely that they will buy new myths which do not appear to be rational, so that new myths, as Plato realised, will necessarily be based on disinformation.

This brings us to the passage from George Orwell that is cited at the top of this essay. "Those who control the present control the past; those who control the past control the future." Those who control the present – assuming that their control is total, can falsify any facts that they choose; they can rewrite history, they can suppress, distort or fake research data on any subject; they can make it appear that absolutely anything has been proved.

It is the hankering for this kind of power that underlies the constantly recurring nostalgia for the idea that we can make the truth if we can only persuade everybody to believe, or pretend to believe that it is so. This is not only the resort of tyrants though it appeals to tyrants very much. It is a resort, too, of people who are in the utmost good faith and are driven by the very intensity of their caring about some or other issue. It surfaces every time somebody seeks to prevent some line of

research or to suppress some finding, on the grounds that the result may be, or the finding is 'undesirable'.

However, as Galileo is reputed to have said, "It moves all the same". Galileo had published the evidence for the belief that the earth moves; specifically that it rotates on its axis and around the sun. He was coerced by the Inquisition into retracting his statements and saying that he did not believe them. The story goes that after announcing his retraction he muttered under his breath, "It moves all the same." And of course it did move all the same. It moved before Galileo published his findings, it was moving while he retracted them, and it has been moving ever since.

The point is, in George Orwell's terms, nobody controls the present. The Inquisition could coerce Galileo but it could not coerce the earth. A sufficiently powerful government could falsify data until everybody believed that blood-letting cures fever or that smallpox is prevented by eating garlic. Everybody might be induced to act on these beliefs, but the germs would not listen. People would die who would otherwise have lived and, what is more serious to the regime, more people would die than in other countries. If the government was not prepared to back down it would be forced either to cut off contact between its people and the rest of the world, so that they would not know how far they had been disadvantaged, or to try to impose its system on the rest of the world by force or fraud. There are numerous examples of both policies in history. Sometimes, as in the case of the Soviet Union, both were pursued at the same time.

We cannot create truth by agreement or deceit unless we are talking about truly arbitrary convention, like the rule of the road; but it is very unlikely that in any real instance we would be talking of these. Arbitrary conventions create no problems. The desire to suppress or distort or fabricate truth arises precisely where there is a truth to suppress or distort.

This fact matters very much. Once a regime, or a whole society, embarks on defending a myth that purports to be based on fact there is no knowing how far the harm will spread or what the cost will be. As we have already noticed, it can lead to cutting off contact with the rest of the world, with the necessary consequence of excluding all sorts of useful and harmless information along with that which is feared. It is likely that ever-widening spheres of enquiry will have to be prohibited so that the defence of the myth is not outflanked. Reality has the inconvenient character that ultimately everything links up with everything else; and there is no knowing in advance from what direction a particular set of ideas may be called in question.

Finally, and most seriously of all, we can never know in advance how important a new theory or discovery may ultimately turn out to be. Those who persecuted Galileo no doubt believed that the scientific facts regarding the movement of the earth were quite unimportant – it made no practical difference – whereas the Mediaeval view of the cosmos was of the utmost importance, underpinning the Christian religion and the conventions of moral behaviour that made civilised human life possible.

At that time both these beliefs were entirely plausible, but they both turned out to be wrong. The revolution in astronomical thinking of which Galileo's work was a vital part led to the new understanding of motion which was formulated by Newton, and it was Newton's laws of motion and the new understanding of mechanics which they opened up, that made possible the industrial revolution and the whole development of the modern world. On the other hand, the Christian religion turned out to be perfectly able to do without Mediaeval cosmography (of which the Twelve Apostles must have been entirely ignorant), and whatever we may think of the condition of morality and the conventions of civilised life in the modern world, they are certainly not in a worse state than they were in Renaissance Italy, the land of Pope Alexander VI and Cesare Borgia.

Great is the Truth, and it shall prevail.

Chapter 4

Who are the progressives now?

It is not uncommon even today, to come across organisations of a “leftist complexion” describing themselves as “progressive”, as they always did in the past. We must realise that in today’s world this epithet means nothing more than that the people concerned believe in what they stand for, so that in their opinion, for them to prevail would constitute progress. They are, of course, entitled both to hold and to express this opinion, but so is anybody else. Anybody who has a goal which he or she believes in, is, in his or her own opinion, progressive. To Hitler, the holocaust represented great progress towards his goal of a world without Jews.

Until a few years ago, however, the word “progressive” contained a far larger claim. It was rooted in a doctrine which was central to Marxism but which was in fact older than Marx, and was accepted by many people who were not Marxists. The doctrine asserted that the world was set in a predetermined and absolutely inevitable course of change, and that this change was always and automatically for the better. Each stage of history was higher than its predecessor, that is, fundamental and profoundly better so that nobody who had experienced a “higher stage” could ever contemplate returning to a lower one.

Capitalism was one of these stages, higher than everything that had gone before it, and the next stage, higher still, was socialism. Capitalism would be replaced by socialism with the inevitability that a river flows downhill, and could no more go the other way than a river could. According to some people, nothing that anybody could do would make any difference; according to others (including Marx) individual effort could both speed and smooth the process, but could not fundamentally alter it.

It was supposed that we were dealing here with absolute laws of nature, as scientific laws were understood in the nineteenth century, before the uncertainty principle, before relativity, before chaos theory. It was a law like Newton’s law of gravity or Boyles law, that capitalism would be replaced by socialism and the reverse could never happen. Socialism could, of course, be suppressed by force or by interventions from outside, although the result would not last, but that it should be abolished by a massive popular upheaval from within, or should evolve into capitalism in the hands of a powerful and independent government, was as impossible as that water should flow uphill, or that gas should be heated without expanding so that steam engines would no longer work.

The theory was supposed to have been derived from a study of history and since it was formulated, history has written another chapter. In no fewer than eight socialist countries (if we count the Soviet Union as one) a socialist government has been swept away by an overwhelming popular rising without any external intervention whatever. These were, in fact, the most unanimous popular risings in recorded history. They were bloodless because nobody, but nobody, was prepared to fight for the old regime, which is more than can be said for the French and Russian revolutions.

In its struggle against *apartheid*, the ANC was never able to call out a demonstration which remotely approached those which took place in Leipzig and Dresden against the communist regime of East Germany. To say this is not to disparage the achievements of the ANC but it is to draw attention to the fact that even apartheid did not arouse in its victims the degree of hatred and anger which was inspired by actually existing socialism in those who experienced it at first hand, the great majority of whom were, of course, members of the working class.

In the meanwhile, in China, without any ostensible change of government, socialism has evolved into the most unbridled Laissez-faire Capitalism in the world, and indeed, perhaps, that the world has ever seen. Eight socialist governments have been swept away by unanimous popular risings and replaced by fully democratic elected governments which have embraced capitalism, while an unelected socialist government, deriving its purported legitimacy from a socialist revolution, has embraced capitalism in an extreme form.

So apparently, the rivers are flowing uphill all over the world. If something happens, clearly and on a large scale, contrary to what we believe to be the laws of nature, we have to revise our

ideas of what those laws are, and so we have to do here. The Marxists' theory of history has been disapproved by events. It has become untenable and has to be abandoned.

Some people have sought to rescue the theory by claiming that that which failed was not "really" socialism. But this line of argument raises the problem that, in that case, socialism is such an obscure and esoteric phenomenon that for seventy years in the world no one knew it when they saw it, or rather, knew what they saw was not it. For seventy years, nobody except Trotsky (after he had been driven into exile but not before) said that what existed in the Soviet Union was not socialism, while a huge consensus of intellectuals around the world hailed it, praised it, lied for it, spied for it and sometimes died for it. If all these people were wrong for all that time, why should we believe them when they say something different now?

Even followers of Trotsky have a problem. Either what existed in Russia under Lenin and Trotsky was socialism or it was not. If it was, then, under Stalin, socialism developed by an internal dynamic into non-socialism. If it was not, why did Trotsky say that it was?

One of the consequences of the collapse of this theory of history that we must particularly note, is that it is no longer possible to claim, in the way that used to be done, that ends justify means. Ends can justify means when the end can be foreseen with confidence. We destroy buildings to prevent the spread of fire, we cut off limbs to save lives, but what if the end cannot be foreseen? It was the Marxist theory of history that purported to give the certainty about the ends of Marxism, and so was claimed to justify any means whatever. That is why it was possible (or, at least, it was claimed that it was possible) to draw a fundamental distinction between the massacres perpetrated by Stalin and the strictly comparable but smaller scale massacres perpetrated by Hitler. Stalin was "progressive", so that what he did was going to produce heaven-on-earth eventually, and for this end any means were justified.

Now we know that Stalin's ends are not going to be attained, ever, or if they are, it will be by quite other means, and Stalin's crimes will not have made any contribution. If ends cannot be foreseen, they cannot justify means. Nobody would say that you can justify the killing of seventy million people (which is what Lenin and Stalin did) in order that Yeltsin rather than Kerensky should rule Russia, which is what they achieved. In a world where long-term ends cannot be foreseen, we have to be much more careful about means.

Given the spectacular failure of the theory of history that has been intellectually fashionable for over a hundred years, it would be very rash to come up with another one and I am certainly not going to put forward an inverted Marxist claim that the world is "inevitably" marching to liberal capitalism. The fact is that we do not know. We have to recognise as a fact that Marxist Socialism was a costly, indeed a catastrophic, failure, and give it up, but that does not mean that we live in the best of all possible worlds or that the future will take care of itself. There is plenty of room for people to work to find new ways of making the world better, provided that they are new, and are not rehashed versions of things that have failed before; and provided that they are put forward with a proper degree of humility.

In this situation, to say that something is "progressive" is simply to say that it is desirable, that there is good reason to believe that it would make life better in the opinion of the people directly affected.

As we no longer believe that progress is automatic and all change is necessarily for the better, we can recognise that in a particular situation it can be progressive to keep things as they are because the only changes that are on the cards are for the worse. It would have been progressive to prevent thalidomide (although it was the latest thing) from coming on the market. It would have been progressive to keep Hitler and Lenin out of power.

In the same way, it can be progressive to bring back the past, if the past was better than the present. In Germany, after the war, it was progressive to revive the federal structure that had been abolished by Hitler. In Russia, at a symbolic level, it was progressive to abolish the red flag and to bring back the old Russian tricolour, which dated back to the Tsar Peter the Great and, on a more practical level, it was very progressive indeed to bring back private property.

Although we have to avoid grandiose theories and especially to avoid either the belief that progress is automatic or that we can foresee the future with certainty, I believe that, looking back over history, we can see, in broad principle, what progress has consisted in.

Progress is real. The world is a better place than it was a hundred years ago and a much better place than it was a thousand years ago. And when we ask what has made it better, we find two strands that turn out to be closely related. First of all, the world has grown richer which means that it has become possible to produce more wealth with less labour (and also with less of other resources). People, even people in the poorest parts of the third world have command of far more material means than their ancestors had and in consequence they live longer and they live better lives. Of course, the poorest are still very poor, but they are not as poor as the poorest were in the past.

The other strand is freedom. Individual people have become freer, which means that they have a greater ability than their ancestors had to choose for themselves among the options before them. They also have more options. That progress is “the march of freedom” is not a new idea. It has been around, in Europe, since the sixteenth century, and in the nineteenth it was popular not only in Europe and America, but in the rest of the world as well. It was, after all, the seed from which the demand for liberation in the colonial empires grew.

What rendered the idea unfashionable for a time was the Marxists’ (and fascists’) contention that there was a trade-off between individual freedom and economic efficiency, and that people should sacrifice freedom for material well-being (which in order to confuse the issue, Marxists called “real freedom”). Now we know that there is no such trade-off. When the communist regime was overthrown in East Germany in 1988, the people there were as far behind West Germany in material well being as they were in individual freedom.

The publication *Economic Freedom of the World* sets out the evidence, which is conclusive, that economic freedom is a necessary condition for material prosperity. Looking at history over longer periods, we find that intellectual freedom is every bit as important as economic freedom. Ideas come first, and creative new ideas only arise where there is a reasonable degree of freedom. Throughout history, wherever freedom has been successfully extended (that is extended without causing an intolerable degree of disorder), progress has followed, both economic and cultural. Wherever freedom has been curtailed, this has been followed by decline. Countries that have suppressed freedom for the sake of military strength have lost out, even militarily, because military strength depends on economic strength, which depends on freedom. The Soviet Union is the only most recent of many cases in point. This proviso for extending freedom without creating disorder, is crucial. Creating freedom is more than abolishing restrictions. A free society needs appropriate institutions and attitudes. Freedom has to be built in ways that work.

So, who are the progressives? If we take the view that there is no tenable theory of history then the word “progressive” is virtually meaningless. Applied to a measure, it simply means that the measure is desirable. Applied to a person, it means that we agree with him. If, however, we accept the idea for which there is certainly a good deal to be said that progress is the extension of freedom, then the people who are progressive in principle, the only people, are liberals.

Reference

Gwartney, J & Lawson, R (1999) *Economic Freedom of the World: 1998/1999 Interim Report - South African Edition*, Free Market Foundation (co-publisher), Johannesburg.

Chapter 5

Everything is relative – but relative to what?

We are all used to hearing people say, “everything is relative”, by which they usually mean that, in their opinion, there are no standards of right and wrong, or of quality, and anybody can do anything they like without fear of the consequences. There may be a case to be made for this point of view (though I doubt it) but one thing is clear: it does not follow from the statement “everything is relative”.

Something that is relative is relative *to* something. To say (if one is talking sense) that something is relative does not mean that it is uncertain or unknowable, it does not mean that it is subjective and anyone can make it up for himself. It means only one thing, which is that before it can be measured, we have to know relative to what it is to be measured.

Of all things that are relative, one of the most obvious and simple examples is speed. That there is no absolute speed is central to the theory of relativity. What we normally think of as speed, the speed of a motor-car or of a runner, is speed relative to the solid surface of the earth. A particular motor-car, for instance, has other speeds. It is not only moving relative to the road; it is following the surface of the earth in its rotation on its axis at a speed that varies, depending on latitude. It is accompanying the earth in its orbit around the sun, and it is accompanying the sun in its movement relative to other stars. Speed can be calculated taking any or all of these into account, but we normally do not do so because we do not need to know them.

However, when we depart from the land and consider ships or aircraft, we find that they have two speeds that matter, in the case of a ship water speed and land speed, in the case of the aircraft air speed and land speed. Land speed is the speed at which an aircraft is moving across the earth’s surface, and it tells us how long it will take to get to any particular place, its destination or a possible emergency landing place, for example. The air speed is the speed at which it is moving through the air immediately around it. It is air speed that determines whether an aircraft can fly or not. The stalling speed, below which it will fall out of the sky, is an air speed. The sound barrier, at which an aircraft not designed to go through it may well break up, is determined by air speed.

Since at the altitudes at which jet aircraft fly, winds of two hundred kilometres per hour are not unusual, air speed and ground speed may be very different, and if we measure one when we should have measured the other the results may be fatal. The use of ground speed when we wanted air speed can result in a stall or a collision with the sound barrier; the use of air speed when we wanted ground speed can result in miscalculating our time of arrival, running out of fuel, and a fatal crash.

So speed is relative, but once we have decided which speed we want, and what it is to be relative to, we can measure it with the ut-most precision, and to choose the right speed for our purpose of all the speeds that there are can be a matter of life and death. All speeds are indeed ‘equally true’, but in a particular set of circumstances only one speed gives us the information that we want.

Of course, not everything can be measured as precisely as speed can. Things that cannot be measured precisely can also be relative. The term in fact says nothing about precision of measurement or exactness of knowledge.

One of the most important areas in which the concept of relativity is raised today is what is called ‘cultural relativism’, which says, or claims to say, that all cultures are of equal value and none can be said to be superior to another.

How does this work? Let us take an extreme example. The Eskimos, in their traditional culture not only practised infanticide of disabled or weakly infants, they also practised the custom of killing the elderly (by driving them out into the winter cold to die). This custom is not only shocking to modern man; it would have absolutely scandalised the Old Testament Jews. (Honour thy father and mother that thy days may be long in the Lord), and would no less have scandalised members of most, if not all, traditional African cultures.

So, are we to regard the Eskimos as heathen savages, worse than almost anybody on earth? "No," says the cultural relativist. The Eskimos lived in such poverty, with such narrow margins of survival, that, like wild animals, they could afford to carry no passengers. If they had tried to care for their aged people as Old Testament Jews or traditional Africans did, they would all have perished. The value of social customs is relative to the circumstances of the people practising them.

This argument is irrefutable, but it does not tell us that all customs are equally valid. It does not say that in the circumstances of the Eskimos, Eskimo customs were as good as African customs, it is saying that they were better – they were the only possible customs.

On the other hand, supposing that the Eskimos had achieved a level of affluence comparable to a traditional African tribe, could they justifiably have continued to kill old people? Supposing they moved into present day Canada and achieved present day Canadian incomes, if they were to persist in killing old people, what would one say of them?

Cultural relativism, properly understood, does not say that all customs are equally good. It says that the value of customs depends on circumstances which will include the level of wealth of the people practising them, and also the climate in which they live. It would suggest (although this point requires further enquiry) that in any particular set of circumstances there is an optimum set of customs and, therefore, so far from implying that people are always and everywhere entitled to keep their existing customs, it seems to say that those who change their circumstances should change their customs in short order.

Let us take another example, very much from contemporary life. Let us consider the custom of sun-bathing. In Britain the sun shines so seldom and it is so often cold, that occasions when it is possible to expose one's skin to the sun are quite rare and because of the high latitude the sun is in any case very weak, so there is a real danger, even among fair-skinned people (much greater with dark skinned people) of a deficiency of vitamin D, which causes rickets in children and other kinds of ill-health in adults. Consequently, it is an extremely useful and beneficial custom for people to take every opportunity that the weather offers to expose as much of their skin as possible to the direct rays of the sun. This is known as sun-bathing.

When fair-skinned people move from Britain to Australia or South Africa or from the north-eastern United States to the south-western States they encounter a situation where the sun shines much of the time and is extremely strong. There is no possibility of anybody – even a dark-skinned person – getting less sunshine than is necessary for health, where the danger of overexposure to the sun which can lead to acute sunburn (which can be fatal) and to skin cancer, is very serious.

The desirability of sun-bathing is relative to the strength and availability of the sun. Those who move from a country of little and weak sunshine to one of much and strong sunshine must change their custom in relation to sun bathing, on peril of their lives.

There is another rather amusing example from history that illustrates the same fundamental point but in a different light. When Tsar Peter the Great (1672-1725) came to the throne, all Russian men wore full beards and all those who could afford it wore long robes (kaftans) down to the ground. The Tsar, anxious to 'modernise' Russia, ordered his courtiers to dress like French courtiers, which meant knee-breeches with silk stockings, and clean shaving. Not surprisingly, among those who complied there was considerable incidence of frost-bite (which can be life-threatening) on the legs (formerly protected by the kaftans) and on their faces (formerly protected by their beards).

This again illustrates cultural relativism properly defined. What is appropriate dress depends on the climate. A custom that is suitable, possibly even optimal, in one set of circumstances may be life-threatening in another. The first example, the sun-bathing, tells us that those whose circumstances have changed often must, on peril of their lives, change their customs. The second seems to tell us that those whose circumstances have not changed must not change their customs.

Clearly we cannot accept the last statement in absolute terms, for it would imply that we can never find a better way of solving an existing problem than the one which we already have; and this is contradicted by a large part of human history. What it does tell us is that we have to be careful about changing customs and especially careful about imitating the customs of people whose

circumstances are different from our own (or of imposing such customs on others). We must be particularly careful of assuming that if we imitate the behaviour of people better off than ourselves, we will become as well off as they.

Sometimes this will be true, but it depends on how cause and effect work. Obviously the Russians were not going to make St Petersburg warmer by wearing silk stockings. There can be three kinds of cases. The Japanese had a high savings rate and a high rate of economic growth. If a poor country imitates the Japanese and attains a high saving rate they will indeed have a high rate of economic growth. The Japanese eat with chop-sticks and had a high rate of economic growth. If a poor country takes to eating with chop-sticks, this will make no difference to their economic growth. The Japanese had a high rate of economic growth, they became affluent, being affluent they indulge in a great deal of overseas travel. If a poor country imitates them in overseas travel not only will this not help them to become affluent, it will help to ensure that they do not.

So, it all depends on circumstances. Everything is relative, or so far, so it appears.

Does it follow that those who have 'entered the modern world' – come, for example, from a tradition-bound countryside into a city – should forthwith abandon every aspect of their culture and adopt, in its entirety, the culture of those who have lived in the cities for a long time?

Until about twenty years ago, this view was widely held, and in fact the doctrine of cultural relativism as actually preached, as distinct from as we define it, was developed in opposition to this view. It was widely believed that culture changed as a country developed economically, that the United States as the most developed country, had the most 'modern' culture, and that the cultures of all other countries would approximate more and more closely to that of the United States as they developed. To the extent that they did not so approximate, they were 'backward' and a brake on progress. The people who held this view called themselves modernisers and they systematically made war on all forms of traditional culture, not only outside the United States but inside it as well.

This view is no longer tenable, at least in its extreme and simplistic form. By now the development gap between the United States and the countries of Western Europe and Japan has for practical purposes closed, and while their cultures have certainly become more similar than they were say a hundred years ago, they are not the same. There are even quite significant differences between countries of Western Europe. It is clear that, if there is such a thing as 'modern' culture, there is more than one possible model for it. So far from there being a correlation between the hall-marks of 'modernism' derived from the United States as a model of development and affluence, some of the richest and therefore most developed European countries (like Switzerland) are also the most traditional.

Then, again, the great majority of the people of India, not only the rural poor, whose conditions have not changed, but also the tens of millions of middle class people whose material conditions are not very different from those of people in Western Europe, have made it perfectly clear that they have no intention of abandoning the fundamentals of their culture and beliefs in favour of any Western or 'modern' model. This in spite of a long period of intense exposure to Western European culture, first under colonial rule and then under an extremely westernised elite. I suspect that the same message is coming out of China, although it is not yet being heard as clearly.

There is another difficulty about asking people to adopt 'modern' culture, and it is a very serious one. When people choose to imitate models they choose things that are clearly successful, that have every appearance of working well, and 'modern' culture is very far from being that. If we look to the United States as the model of modern culture, as used to be customary, we are looking at a society plagued with every kind of social pathology. While it is somewhat controversial as to what is and is not social pathology (in relation, for example, to birth out of wedlock) nobody surely would deny that violent crime represents pathology.

Not all economically advanced countries have the same culture, and not all have the same level of violent crime. There would appear to be alternative models and part of our problem is that we simply do not know enough to say what, if anything, the differences between these different cultures are relative to. Some people contend that cultures are crucially dependent on long tradition, that they are therefore incapable of export and imitation. These people would argue that so far from

being a particularly 'advanced' culture, the United States is an example of 'deculturation' caused by migration; that it is culturally impoverished, and that its social pathologies are attributable to this fact. Others would say that the pathologies are a price that is paid (presumably willingly, but that is questionable) for positive advantages that the American way of life has that the Swiss and Japanese lack.

We are not going to be able to solve this question. What is clear is that cultures are immensely complicated and we do not know enough to be able to engineer them. They are full of subtle and obscure linkages so that a change that is put forward as being 'for the plain good of man' (as Milton said of divorce) may cause great and quite unsuspected harm in another quarter.

In the evolution of Jewish law the sages, at the end of the Roman era, set themselves, as they said, to 'put a fence around the law', that is to set up a series of secondary prohibitions which would make contravention of the primary prohibitions of the law itself much less likely, or ideally, impossible. These are the rules of orthodox Jewish conduct which appear to outsiders to be completely arbitrary, and even silly, but if the law itself is important (and much of it obviously is), they may be serving a vitally important purpose. This sort of thing is not peculiar to Jews. All cultures contain apparently arbitrary taboos, the purpose of which is to defend really important taboos, to keep people out of temptation, or risk of doing things that are seriously damaging to themselves or others. It is precisely these defences which those who tamper with culture without care are likely to destroy.

So, what conclusions can we draw? We are not going to find a simple rule-of-thumb that will give us adequate guidance in this area. As so often in real life, we just cannot escape from the need to use judgement and discretion in solving particular problems. Clearly we cannot accept dogmatic (so-called) cultural relativism which asserts that all cultures are of equal value *irrespective of circumstances*, for this will retard useful and even vital changes and adaptations and will discourage people from imitating models of specially successful behaviour, which is one of the main engines of progress.

But no more can we accept dogmatic 'modernising' or an equivalent, which pretends that we know exactly where we are going and exactly how to get there and all we have to do is get there as fast as possible. We do not have the knowledge necessary for such an approach to be viable and it is extremely unlikely that we shall ever possess such knowledge. Customs and inhibitions may serve purposes that we do not understand, and changes are certain to produce unintended consequences. Change always has to be approached with caution and should, wherever possible, be gradual. This does not necessarily mean that it must be very slow. It means, as the word 'gradual' actually implies, step by step, a little at a time, so that it is possible to stop, to change direction, and, if necessary, to back-track quickly if unacceptable unintended consequences emerge.

Finally, it is desirable that decisions as to whether to change or not, and how and how far to change, should be taken by the people who will actually bear the costs and benefits of doing so, which means by the ordinary people concerned, not by governments or 'experts' or 'vanguards' or elite, who all too often either exempt themselves from the laws which they lay down or insulate themselves from the consequences, just as Stalin and Mao Tse-Tung did not go hungry when they created mass famine in their countries.

As far as possible, decisions to change cultural behaviour should be taken by individuals or the small groups in which individuals usually act. That some shall change and some not is desirable, for it allows the two approaches to compete and their respective merits to be demonstrated in practice. When it is inevitable that such decisions are taken by governments (and let us emphasise this should be as seldom as possible), they should be taken in the most democratic manner possible, and the door should always be kept open for back-tracking.

Chapter 6

Freedom is the precondition of progress

Nobody who has even a slight acquaintance with world history can have failed to be struck by the occurrence of periods of extraordinary creativity in a few places and for quite short times, which have made greater contributions to human progress than the whole of the rest of the world put together. It does not matter what aspect of human life you are studying; whether it is literature, or philosophy for fine art or science or technology. We find not only that there are such periods, but that the periods are the same. They are creative not only in one or two fields but in every field of human endeavour that existed at the time.

These periods of outstanding creativity are quite few. There is the classical period of China, the time of Confucius and Mencius, and the other Chinese Sages. At about the same time, there is classical Greece, the age of Aeschylus and Euripides, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Herodotus and Thucydides, Phidias and Praxiteles. The next period is less well known since most of its art and literature had perished and the only well known names associated with it are Archimedes and Euclid. It is the period of the kingdoms ruled by the successors of Alexander the Great, especially Egypt, centred on Alexandria, and Syria, centred on Antioch and forming part of the same world, the independent Greek cities of Sicily and Southern Italy, especially Syracuse. To appreciate the importance of this period we have to compare the level of general sophistication, both philosophical and technical, reflected in classical Latin literature with that of “golden age” Greek literature from four hundred years earlier.

We have to wait a long time for the next period which happened in the Middle East around 1000 AD in the Arab kingdoms, especially those centred on Baghdad and Cairo. Out of these came remarkable advances in science and mathematics and in architecture. The well-known Moorish architecture of Spain is an offshoot of this. After this, and in some ways directly derived from it, comes the flowering of Renaissance Italy, Michelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci, Petrarch and Boccaccio, Machiavelli and Galileo.

After this we are approaching modern times in which creativity becomes both more widespread and more continuous, but we can still see a disproportionate amount in Holland in the seventeenth century, in Britain all the way from Shakespeare times to the end of the nineteenth century, and in the United States from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day.

We may also note that right through from the middle ages to present day Western Europe as a whole, while not equalling the special periods, was creative in a way in which the Roman Empire, the later Chinese Empires and the Byzantine Empire were not.

How are we to account for all this? From the sixteenth century onwards it is not difficult to detect the correlation between creativity and (relative) freedom. Though very far from free in the modern sense, the England of Shakespeare’s time, and the Republic of the Netherlands of the same period were not merely the freest countries in the world at the time, they were among the freest that there had ever been. As the seventeenth century went on Britain (now including Scotland) became freer, while the Netherlands, locked in a desperate fight for survival, first with Spain and then with France, became less so. The degree of creativity, especially in philosophy and science, moved accordingly.

Do we find a similar correlation in earlier times? At first sight, the answer to this question is no. None of the states involved in any of the earlier outbursts of creativity upheld individual freedom in principle; even for the members of the upper class. Republics were not necessarily better than monarchies in this respect. Socrates was put to death in the Republic of Athens (by popular vote) for teaching unacceptable ideas, and about sixteen hundred years later Dante driven out of the Republic of Florence and sentenced to death in absentia. But freedom does not have to be accepted in principle to exist in practice. It can exist because those charged with repression are half-hearted, or lazy or cannot agree among themselves. This was more or less the position in Elizabethan England.

Were the periods of unusual creativity also periods of unusual freedom, and if so, how did this come about? I think that the answer to the first question is “yes” and the answer to the second can be found. I gained the clue to this problem in a book describing the society of China under the Tang Dynasty that was one of the high points of Chinese civilisation around 1000 AD. The writer says that the people of the educated class at this time looked back to the time of Confucius as a golden age, forgetting that it was in fact a time of anarchy known as “The Period of the Warring States”, when China proper (that is excluding Tibet, Manchuria and Sechuan) was divided into five separate kingdoms, often at war with each other.

Now we see it, “The Period of the Warring States” would be a very fair description of fifth century Greece. If we started with the assumption that Greece ought to have been under a single government (as the later Chinese assumed about China), it could also be called a time of anarchy. Greece was divided into not five, but dozens of separate states which were often at war with each other. Renaissance Italy is the same story, with at least six major states, and some smaller ones, independent and sometimes at war. The Eastern Mediterranean after Alexander the Great was the same again. There were three major, and several minor, kingdoms all ruled by Macedonians, often at war with each other. The great period of the Arab world saw almost the very same kingdoms, now ruled by Arabs, independent and sometimes at war.

This is not to argue that what leads to creativity is warfare. The periods which we are considering were not exceptionally warlike, it is merely that in them people who might have been expected to be on the same side in war were sometimes fighting each other. There are plenty of examples of states devoted to war, and for a time very successful at it, which were not creative at all.

The great empires have often produced remarkable architecture and works of art, made possible by the accumulation of wealth brought about by conquest but they have never been noted for originality, least of all originality of thought. One can cite the Roman Empire after Augustus, China under the Tangs and the Mings, Spain in its period of greatness, and Byzantium over a thousand years.

The thing that the periods which we are considering had in common was not that there was a lot of war going on; indeed it is not clear that there was more war than at other times. It is that in each case, China, Greece, the Macedonian kingdoms, the Arab world, Italy, there were a number of independent states with the same language and the same culture, with the consequence that it was an easy matter for educated people (and others too) to move from one to another. When Socrates was sentenced to death in Athens, he could, if he so wished, and was probably expected to go into exile, which meant moving all of thirty miles to another city where they spoke the same language, had the same culture, and where he was known. When Dante was driven out of Florence, he went to live in Pisa and carried on with his writing. When Michelangelo quarrelled with the Pope in Rome, he went home to Florence and continued with his work. There are references in the Chinese classics to Sages moving from one kingdom to another because they disliked the policies of a particular king.

It is striking how many of these periods of creativity come to an end when “anarchy” was ended and unified government imposed. Particularly obvious, because familiar is the way in which the Roman world started to go downhill from the time of Augustus. The Han Empire in China (which succeeded the Warring State) was powerful and rich, but it was not creative like the time of Confucius and indeed was already looking back to that period as a golden age. The Renaissance in Italy went downhill from the time that Italy was brought under Austrian/Spanish control. The Arab world was destroyed by the Mongols but it did not recover under the unified Turkish Empire.

It is not difficult to see why this was so once we grasp that the precondition for creativity is freedom. When Dante was driven out of Florence he went to Pisa but when the poet Ovid incurred the displeasure of the Emperor Augustus, he was sent to live in the Crimea, just as under the Han or Tang emperors of China, Sages were sent to Hunan, and “dissidents” in both Tsarist and Soviet Russia were sent to Siberia.

By Galileo's time, the whole of Italy was effectively controlled by Spain. If Galileo had wanted to leave Italy in search of greater freedom, the nearest place where he could have found refuge was Holland where the language, culture and religion were all different from his own. This was a far more formidable undertaking than going from Athens to Corinth or Florence to Pisa, but a lot better than going to the Crimea, Hunan or Siberia. People did move about Western Europe in search of religious or intellectual freedom helped by the use first of Latin and later of French as international languages, whereas in Roman or Chinese Empires there was simply nowhere to go. This no doubt explains the relative creativity of Western Europe as a whole.

We are looking at two things here, although they are closely linked. In the special cases which we have described, the ease of exit which the situation created gave to the people (or at least some of them) a degree of freedom which they could not otherwise have had. Beyond this, it inhibited the rulers' oppressive impulses for the rulers did not wish to lose their subjects, and on the whole those who could most easily leave were those that they could least spare. Thus additional freedom was also enjoyed by people who did not wish to leave.

It is also possible that there was another factor at work. Because of the ease of movement and communication between these countries, they would have been exceptionally well informed about each other, which would have intensified competition between them and enabled them to learn from each other's experience in a way which would have been prevented by the imposed uniformity of a large state.

Until the nineteenth century, ease of exit (which of course requires ease of entry somewhere else) does seem to have been the most effective source of freedom. The degree of freedom which is conferred, even in the best circumstances, fell far short of what we expect today and some parts of the population may not have benefited at all; but it was sufficient to make the places where it existed flower above all others in creativity and achievement.

It is interesting that when we look back in this way, it is intellectual freedom, freedom of ideas which appears to be most important, whereas in our own time we tend to be most impressed by economic freedom. This is a question of time scales. In order to flourish economically, a country needs economic freedom, and for a time it can do without full intellectual freedom, just as long, in fact, as it can base its economic progress on ideas and techniques borrowed from abroad, but in the long run, ideas are the most important. Countries, like Mainland China, that think they can have economic freedom without intellectual freedom will, in the long run, be proved wrong.

Fundamentally, Hegel was right and Marx wrong. Ideas come first as in fact Marx knew or why did he spend his life trying to develop ideas which he hoped would change the world? Even "means of production" are ideas before they are things. Newton's laws of motion had to come before the Industrial Revolution, just as Einstein had to come before nuclear explosives and space travel.

Freedom is not a luxury that comes at a cost. It is the precondition of all human progress.

Chapter 7

The fallacy of Social Darwinism

Social Darwinism” was a doctrine that was popular in the last part of the nineteenth century. It started from a simplified version of the theory of evolution as propounded by Darwin (hence the name) and Wallace, namely that life is a competitive struggle for survival in which the fittest survive and the least fit perish. As the ‘fit’ are superior to the ‘unfit’ and every generation is descended from the ‘fitter’ members of the previous generation, this leads to constant improvement and is indeed the mechanism of progress. The belief in automatic progress as a law of nature was older than Darwin, but Darwinism was considered to have explained how it worked. It was held that it was *because* life was a competitive struggle in which the fittest survived, that progress was automatic and inevitable.

‘Darwinism’ related to the process of biological evolution and the selection of biologically inherited characteristics. Social Darwinism moved away from this, and that is the main point, but before we get to that, it is worth noting that the simplified version of Darwinism set out above is not quite an accurate reflection of what Darwin said, and is very far from being how we understand evolution today. There are three points.

First of all the fossil record, as we now have it, simply does not reflect the steady progress postulated by Darwinism. Biological change seems to happen sporadically during particular eras when changes are, in terms of geological time, quite rapid, while for very long periods almost no change takes place. This has been called ‘punctuated equilibrium’. Normally, and for very long periods all, or nearly all species are in equilibrium and do not change much, but the record is ‘punctuated’ with occasional eras when very many changes happen quite rapidly.

These findings are not compatible with the idea that the engine of change is competitive struggle or the survival of the fittest, for that is a constant process and would produce the kind of steady change which Darwin himself believed in. It would appear that most of the time ‘the survival of the fittest’ is conservative in its effects, suppressing change, and that the changes are brought about by some extraneous force, most probably change of climate.

This brings us to the second point, one that was made nearly a hundred years ago by Eugene Marais, the Afrikaans poet who was also a remarkable naturalist. The struggle for survival is not only, and perhaps not mainly, competitive. It is also a struggle against a potentially hostile and always merciless inanimate environment. If the environment changes, some survive, some perish, depending not on any competition but on how capable they are of adapting to their new circumstances, in which those *less* fit before may suddenly be *more* fit now.

The last point brings us to the third issue – that we are not entitled automatically to call change progress. ‘Progress’ implies that things are getting better, which in its turn implies a norm of quality, and where does that come from? The fittest survive. Fittest for what? Fittest to survive. If the environment in which they had to survive was constant we would at least be able to postulate an ever-improving adaptation to the environment, but if the environment is subject to catastrophic changes, even that does not apply. From time to time a new ball game is initiated, and the process of adaptation has to start again.

Finally we have to note that if survival is our criterion of excellence (and what other criterion can there be if the whole process is driven simply by blind survival?), then the fossil record does not support the view that the latest is always the best. To take one recent finding which illustrates the point: A million years ago the most common species of buck in South Africa was the Impala. Since then more than twenty new species have evolved, more than ten of these have become extinct, and the commonest buck in South Africa is – the Impala!

These are the problems of biological Darwinism. The problems of Social Darwinism are different. First of all one must be clear that Social Darwinism really did exist. For many years now nobody has upheld it and it has been used as a straw man for the purpose of attacking capitalism, which has been alleged by its enemies to embody Social Darwinism. However, in the nineteenth century there really were Social Darwinists, the most eminent in Britain was Herbert Spencer, who

both preached the doctrine and praised capitalism as providing what the doctrine showed to be necessary. This is not the only time in history that capitalism has been gravely damaged by those who thought they were its friends.

The Social Darwinists contended that human society was also an arena for struggle for survival in which the fittest survived, or if it was not, it ought to be. This process, if left to itself, brought about improvement. Insofar as human society was organised to help the unfit to survive, this was wrong and should be stopped as it retarded progress and could, if taken far enough, lead to the deterioration of the human species. Moderate Social Darwinists contented themselves with grumbling that the poor reproduced themselves faster than the rich (which, in fact, seems to suggest that the poor were in fact 'fitter' than the rich, but few people took that point), but the extremists, including Herbert Spencer, denounced all forms of provision for the unfortunate whether public or private, socially harmful; according to Herbert Spencer the unsuccessful should die. If they did not die before they reproduced (which was first prize) their children should die too.

According to Spencer, capitalism was the ideal system, provided it was not spoilt by public provisions like the Poor Law (which he denounced) or private charity. It was competitive. The winners become wealthy, the losers become poor, the most complete losers become destitute, and if only silly people would not interfere, would die. This would bring about progress.

We should note in passing that the Social Darwinists had problems with other more literal minded Darwinists of whom the American novelist Jack London was an example. These people contended that capitalism was a horrible deviation from the proper struggle for survival, which was physical. In a 'natural' society constant warfare and killing would select fine, big, strong, physically healthy specimens (like Jack London) whereas capitalism, contrary to nature, brought to prominence weedy specimens like Rockefeller and JP Morgan.

This view is completely self-contradictory. If you want to rely on natural selection, then whatever is, is right. 'Nature' has deemed cockroaches, termites and oysters to be very fit indeed because they have survived, almost unchanged, for hundreds of millions of years, which is a great deal more than can be said for homo sapiens. If Rockefeller does better than Jack London, that is how it is. What he has is 'fitter' than what Jack London has. If, however, you want to impose your own rational or moral criteria of what is good (London is better than Rockefeller) then you can no longer invoke natural selection. You are asking for an 'artificial' society, which is what you are complaining about.

The fact is, of course, that since human beings are intelligent and foresighted there can be no 'natural' orders of human society, if by that we mean one in the formation of which human judgement and wishes have played no part. While no human society has ever been entirely constructed as a blue-print planned by a few people, all societies have evolved through the interaction of rational human beings with each other. This is human nature, so this is natural.

Herbert Spencer's position did not suffer from this weakness. He would have had no difficulty with the idea that he was talking about progress in strictly human terms; things getting better in the opinion of those most directly affected. Capitalism is a system where people compete to promote their own self-interest by serving the needs of others. Those who succeed are those who serve the needs of others most successfully, in the opinion of the people who are served. So, as the fittest prevail, the needs of all are served more and more successfully, more and more people get what they want, and that is progress.

So far this analysis is correct, except that the last statement is disputable. It runs into the criticism of those (quite numerous) people who believe that people should not have what they want; they should have what other people say is good for them. The trouble with capitalism, these people say, is that it *does* give people what they want, so it gives rise to phenomena like Pop Music and Elvis Presley whereas Socialism creates real art, like piles of bricks in the Tate Gallery. There is no ultimate answer to this complaint except to ask, what is it that entitles some people to tell other people what is good for them, who the 'some people' are to be, and how are they to be selected? Nobody has ever answered these questions satisfactorily either.

So far, Herbert Spencer's position is fine, but we now come to the two points on which it is not fine. Built into it are two assumptions which are false, and which render it completely invalid.

The first assumption is that the poor, or even the destitute, in a capitalist society represent the losers in competition. This is false. First of all, as we have pointed out in another essay, capitalist competition does not strictly speaking, produce losers. Secondly, normally in a capitalist society the poorest people are in fact newcomers who have come from a worse environment in order to better themselves – in the process showing a considerable degree of 'fitness'. The recent migrant into Greater Johannesburg from the Northern Province, into Cape Town from the Transkei, into the United States from Mexico, or, in Herbert Spencer's Britain, into Glasgow from the Highlands of Scotland, is not a loser.

The second point is far more fundamental. Darwinism is about the selection of inherited characteristics and for Social Darwinism to have any validity we have to believe that the differences in behaviour which make the difference between success and failure, as between individuals, as between groups, as between nations, depend to an important extent on inherited characteristics. Spencer would have believed this, as did a great many people in his time. It was the belief out of which ideas of racism flowed.

The idea is an old one and has been held by many people in many cultures. People, whether as nations or as parts of a nation, a 'class', who are doing particularly well at any time have often, perhaps always liked to assure themselves that their success will last by claiming that they owe it to a fundamental, inherited, biological superiority, so that they are as different from other people as lions are different from jackals, and therefore are sure to prevail. The ancient Greeks had such a belief about themselves, Aristotle saying that all non-Greeks were incapable of the 'good life'. The ruling orders in the Middle Ages had such a belief about themselves, not as a nation but as a class. The Chinese had such a belief at various times in history, as had many British in the nineteenth century and many Germans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

One can readily understand why people wanted to believe such things, but unfortunately for them, and very fortunately for humanity, they were wrong. History is full of the stories of people preening themselves on their inherited superiority to others, who later (not always much later) equalled or surpassed them; the ancient Greeks, conquered first by the "semi-barbarian" Macedonians, then by the wholly barbarian Romans; the Romans who were quite willing to acknowledge the civilisation of the Greeks and Egyptians, and even of the Babylonians and Persians, writing off the Germans (including the ancestors of the English) as irredeemable savages; the Chinese preening themselves on their superiority to both the Europeans and the Japanese; the Europeans sure of their superiority to the Japanese; Japanese and Chinese alike through the centuries, writing off the Koreans as hopelessly stupid and lazy. Perhaps the most remarkable of all was the Englishman in the nineteenth century who said that the United States could never amount to anything because it had been populated by "the defeated classes of the defeated nations of Europe". The statement was perfectly true. It had been, but that fact did not prevent it from becoming the richest and most powerful country in the world, and also, for a considerable time, the world's main source of both scientific and technological innovation.

The biological, or racist, interpretation of the source of progress and achievement in human affairs is not tenable. It is simply not supported by the facts. The other great set of facts which contradicts it is all the records of the massive difference in achievement of people of the same ethnic origin (and with the same cultural background) under different social systems; East and West Germany between 1945 and 1990, North and South Korea, the Irish in America and the Irish in Ireland, Indians in Britain (or in South Africa), and Indians in India, and so on and on.

The only conclusion which is in accordance with the facts is that we are looking not at genetically inherited characteristics but at learnt behaviour, and that *all people can learn*. This is not to deny that there are big differences between individuals in their ability to invent and innovate, but there is no reason to suppose that such individuals are commoner in some populations than in others. What is true is that such individuals are encouraged and helped in some cultures and persecuted and kept down in others, so that we see invention and innovation flowering in Italy at

one time, in Holland at another, then in Britain (especially Scotland), then in Germany, the United States, Japan, then Korea. Where next? But even if some nations did not produce many innovators, they could still learn from others. Germany, the United States and Japan each went through a period when their progress was based mainly on applying the discoveries of others. In fact, each in turn became great discoverers but if they had not they could still have progressed very far.

It is important to remember that even the most innovative and successful nations have learnt far more from other people than they invented for themselves. An American space shot depends on mathematics originated in ancient Babylon and developed in Greece, in the Arab world, in Italy, France, England and Germany. It depends on a system of numerals coming from India via Arabia, and an alphabet from the Lebanon. It could hardly happen without paper, invented in China, where also, explosives and rockets were invented.

Newton said, "If we have seen further than our predecessors it is because we stood on the shoulders of giants". This is true of all innovators, even the greatest, whether in science, technology, the arts, or anywhere else. The innovator takes a huge mass of already existing knowledge and technique (including such things as mathematics) and makes quite a small addition which opens up a major new possibility.

If follows that the other great thing that is necessary for material progress, apart from a social system that allows, encourages and rewards initiative and innovation, is access to the mass of knowledge that has been generated in the rest of the world. Any nation, or small group of nations which was forced by isolation to invent everything for itself was bound to fall behind those who could draw on the whole world, and this fact is quite sufficient to account for the relative backwardness of Africa South of the Sahara in past history.

So Herbert Spencer's Social Darwinism was just wrong. In biological evolution there is nothing that the losers can do. A zebra cannot decide that the answer to its problem is horns, or a bat that what it needs is feathers, but the Mediaeval Europeans could decide that the Arabic numerals (the ones that we use today) were better than their own (the old roman numerals, XII, etc) and adopt them. If they had not done so, modern mathematics and therefore modern science and therefore modern technology could never have developed in Europe. Peter the Great of Russia could and did decide that the way that the Dutch built ships was better than the way the Russians did, and arranged for the Russians to learn ship-building in Holland. The Japanese decided to copy all sorts of things from Europe and America, some of which they later improved on, and so on.

Progress does not require that the unfortunate and unsuccessful should perish. If we want a materialist (as distinct from a humanitarian) reason why the unfortunates should not be allowed to perish, we can find it in saying that everybody can still learn and so come to make a contribution. Capitalists in particular do not want anybody to perish since the more people there are that they can employ (and the healthier these people are) the better is it for them.

However, Darwinism does have something to teach us about social and economic progress once we realise that the things that compete and are selected as fit or unfit by competition are not people (people adapt and learn) but institutions, systems and ideas. The socio-economic systems of both the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia were selected out and perished, just like apartheid. The same thing is happening on a small scale all the time and everywhere. Different systems and technologies compete; the better prevail and the less good are abandoned, companies succeed and companies fail, as do products. Competition, both on a large and on a small scale is constantly both providing the incentive for innovation and sorting out the successful innovation from the unsuccessful, providing in fact for the survival of the fittest, that is for those which meet our needs most effectively.

There is something here that we can learn from Spencer. He deplored intervention to prevent the unfit from perishing. He was wrong, not because he had mistaken the connection between competition, selection and progress, but because he had mistaken who and what it is that is competing. It is indeed wrong for governments to intervene, as they constantly do, to prevent the perishing not of 'unsuccessful' individuals but of unsuccessful companies, industries and activities. To prop up unsuccessful industries by means of tariff protection or subsidies or by suppressing competition (often the real purpose of nationalisation) is damaging to progress, and while it would

be rash to say that these things can never be justified in any circumstances, the presumption is always strongly against them, and when they are done they must be clear and unambiguous temporary measures (nationalisation which in its nature is permanent can *never* be sensible) aimed at smoothing a process of change, never at preventing it.

We must be clear that in the process which we are discussing we are not talking about 'natural selection' in the strict sense, that is selection by blind natural forces, which raises the serious question why whatever they produce should be regarded as progress. We are talking about selection by intelligent acting human beings. In capitalist competition people compete to serve the needs of customers, whether by supplying products or by supplying services. The customers decide which of the alternatives offered to them are 'fit' and which are not. Progress means that the wishes of people are met more satisfactorily than before, in the opinion of the people themselves.

The competition of social and political systems operates in the same way, though less efficiently because of the constant use of force and fraud to prevent free choice. Nevertheless the systems are 'offered' to people to serve their needs, and the people eventually decide whether they are fit or not. The history of the Soviet Union shows that even the most horrendous and sustained use of violence and deceit cannot prevent the process from prevailing eventually.

There is a last point to be made. There is, as we have seen, no objection to caring for the unfortunate, but there is every objection to rewarding those who refuse to adapt. Not only progress but also survival in a world that is constantly changing depends above all on the willingness and ability to adapt. What we need for progress is that the innovators should be free to innovate; that they should have to compete to show that their innovation is worthwhile; that those whose innovations are chosen should reap a reward; and that the mass of people who are not innovators should follow, or imitate the successful innovators. If we want to prevent progress, all we have to do is to take away the reward of the innovators and 'redistribute' it to those who prefer not to adapt. Quite a lot of societies in the past have done this and have been fairly successful in preventing progress. Is that what we want to do?

Chapter 8

The two kinds of competition

The word 'competition' is used to describe two different things, and while they are not unconnected they are so dissimilar that confusion between them leads to very serious misunderstanding. What makes matters worse is that the form of competition which is most prominent in the consciousness of the average person is not the form which is most important in the real world.

The word competition comes from two Latin words meaning 'seeking together', and refers to the situation when a number of people are trying to gain possession of the same thing, or of similar things. What it does not specify is whether there is only one thing so that of all those who are trying to gain it only one can succeed, or whether there are many so that many or even all of those seeking may gain them, but probably not to the same extent. These are the two kinds of competition.

When people talk about 'holding a competition' they are normally thinking of an arrangement where there will be one (or a few prizes), for which people will compete. There will be a winner, or a few winners, and the rest will be losers. Competitive sport, which plays a large role in the lives of most people as spectators and followers if not as participants, is always organised on this basis. Games are always about winning or losing, and in addition to the fact that each individual game has a winner and a loser (such games as races, many losers), there are often further elaborate arrangements to produce an 'overall winner' or champion – leagues in football and similar games, championships in boxing and golf.

It is worth noting in passing that the arrangements of the leagues and championships is highly artificial. There are in no sense genuine attempts to find out who is best (which is probably a meaningless concept anyway). Their purpose is to produce a winner or a champion and they have to produce one, even if, eventually they have to spin a coin to do so. The point is well illustrated by the refusal of some football leagues to accept drawn matches. Instead, a drawn match is 'decided' by a series of increasingly arbitrary procedures, like set shooting at goal.

From the fact that all games have winners it is a small step to believing that the purpose of playing games is to win them. This is dubious. The purpose of most competitions was originally to encourage people to participate in an activity which would benefit them in some way. The Ancient Greeks regarded athletics as a vital part of military training. Its purpose was to strengthen all the participants, not just the winners, and the competitions and the prizes were simply a means to induce people to take part and to do their best.

The idea that games were played for their own sake and not to win was strongly held in some quarters until quite recently, but the thing which has destroyed it is the overwhelming predominance of spectator sports played by professionals. The spectators want their team to win. For them (and they are the huge majority) winning is everything and the professional players have no option but to go along with this attitude. They are paid extra if they win. In games like golf and tennis the prizes for champions are enormous. They are professionals and they are actually playing for money, but the rewards are structured so that they are playing to win.

From this came two ideas which are almost universally held today: 'Competition is about winning' and 'Where there is competition there are winners and losers'. In fact this is only true of the one kind of competition, hardly at all of the other.

Most of the 'games' kind of competition is artificial. Special rules are carefully crafted to throw up an unambiguous winner. In real life, outside of sport, there are few such situations. For one thing there are not unambiguous winners. The various pop-singers (or for that matter, concert pianists, or architects, or surgeons) in the world are in competition with each other, but who is the winner? If one asked a group of thoroughly knowledgeable people who is the greatest singer alive today, it is most unlikely that they would agree. There would be dozens of candidates, each with their supporters. And even if they did agree, another group would not agree with them. Real life situations do not throw up champions. Neither, of course, in any real sense, do games. A particular team wins the soccer league this year because the league is structured so that somebody has to win but somebody else will probably win next year.

The competition which is part of a capitalist economy and the competition which was identified by Darwin and his followers as forming part of the basis of evolution has very little in common with the games-type competition.

There are, indeed, some examples of competition which resemble the 'games-type' outside the sphere of games. One is the competitive examination when only a limited number of candidates will succeed irrespective of how well they all do. This is like a game with a limited number of prizes and, like a game, it is a situation which has been structured artificially. Another is competition for promotion in a hierarchical organisation. There are always fewer promotion posts than people who can be promoted, so that we have the case of many people competing for few 'prizes'.

Particular situations can arise which look very much like a game or race. Several identified people are in line for a particular promotion; only one will get it; but even in these cases we are seldom looking at a simple case of winners and losers because those who lose in the one instance have other alternatives. It is not at all uncommon to hear someone say that the best thing that ever happened to him was to miss some promotion because it led him to change his direction in a way which turned out to be more to his advantage. It is only when people are locked into a hierarchy and cannot change their jobs, like in the Mediaeval church or a Communist Party, that such competition is truly internecine.

Such situations are in any case relatively rare. The type of 'capitalist' competition which takes place not only throughout human society but throughout animate nature, is something quite different. Let us take as our example a particularly obvious and well-known example of capitalist competition: a retailer operating in a reasonably free market. We can consider later whether his case is indeed typical. The first thing that we notice is that the shopkeeper does not spend his days confronting his competitors or indeed dealing with them in any way. He spends his days dealing with his customers, with his employees if he has any, and with his suppliers, that is to say, with people with whom he co-operates. What he actually does in order to compete is to try and improve the quality of his co-operation – essentially to serve his customers better.

His competitors are not a defined group, like an opposing football team. He may have a competitor next door, but he may not. He may be the only shop of his kind in his particular shopping centre but he is still in competition with others, all over the town and even beyond, possibly with others kinds of suppliers, like mail-order houses. Also, to a vague but real extent, he is in competition with people who sell quite different things. This is not a major factor in the life of a grocer, though it is not quite absent, but a seller of jewellery is likely to be very conscious that he is competing with the seller of sports cars and with the seller of overseas package-tours.

The fact that 'the competition' is a vast and vague mix of different kinds of people, in different places and doing different things, many of whom the retailer does not know personally, and of some of whose existence he may be unaware, is a most important reason why competition seldom issues in overt hostility or conflict (though it can do, as we know from the taxi wars). In the vast majority of cases there can be no question of trying to destroy the competition and indeed of engaging in any kind of active conflict with them because they are too numerous and too largely unknown. In fact, our retailer seldom meets his competitors, and if he does it will not be for the purpose of competing but for the purpose of co-operating as in a chamber of commerce.

Normally, attempts to destroy competitors make no sense because more will simply arise in their place. Grocer's shops do not buy out the competitor across the street because if they do somebody else will come in. The idea of destroying the competition can only arise in one of two situations. The one is where the number of competitors is artificially limited so that if a certain number are eliminated no more can come in. This was the situation created by the old Liquor Act in South Africa. In a certain area only a limited number of licences were allowed. If you could acquire all of them you eliminated all obvious competition. You had not in fact eliminated all competition. Liquor is in competition with non-alcoholic drinks and with other ways of spending money and people can go to distant places to buy liquor, but you have eliminated enough competition to give yourself a major benefit.

The other situation where the elimination of competition makes sense is one of lawlessness, where a group of people hope to be able, by violence, both to drive out all existing competition and to prevent any new competition from arising. This policy was followed on a large scale by the European maritime powers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when first the Spanish and Portuguese and later also the Dutch and the British tried to establish monopolies of trade in particular areas and to keep out all competition by violence. The policy did not succeed and led to constant warfare, which in its turn led to the establishment of the rules which govern international trade today.

Among human beings for competition to be a peaceful process requires law but when law is present competition does not (as its critics allege) give rise to a society dominated by internecine conflict. People do not compete by trying to destroy each other; they compete by trying to serve their customers better.

The biological competition to which Darwin and his followers drew attention turns out to be very closely, analogous, not, oddly enough, to human conflict but to human competition under law. How this comes about is very interesting. The Victorians tended to see natural selection in terms of a sort of World Heavyweight Boxing Championship in which all animals fought each other to the death, until only the 'fittest' was left, but we now know that this is scarcely ever so. Animals very seldom fight members of their own species to the death. Territorial and mating conflict tends to take place either simply by posturing (as among birds) or by ritualised fighting in which little damage is done (as among horned animals).

Nature is 'red in tooth and claw' not in terms of competition but in terms of predation. Animals prey on other animals at a huge advantage so that the risk taken by the predator is negligible. Cats catch mice. (What can a mouse do to a cat?) Several lions together set on a buck, and usually a sick one at that. The difference between human beings and all other animals is that the humans can sometimes, by innovation in weapons, tactics or organisation, put themselves in a position to defeat others at a cost acceptable to themselves. Other animals cannot do this; they have to meet their own kind on a basis of equality, and a fight to the death on a basis of equality is a mug's game, as was so well illustrated in the battle of the Somme.

So biological competition resembles human competition under law, with the principle that the better part of valour is discretion, universally followed by animals other than human beings fulfilling the role of the rule of law. There is constant conflict between predator and prey, but competitors seldom come into conflict, and indeed, just as in the human situation, often do not see each other or even know of each other's existence. Snakes and cats both prey on mice and cats are more efficient predators than snakes. If cats arrive in an area where there has previously been only snakes, the snakes will find that there are fewer mice and their own numbers may decline, but they will probably never set eyes on the cats.

Most of the time, in both the human and the animal situation, competition is essentially in equilibrium. Competition sets a minimum standard of efficiency which everybody has to meet, and everybody does meet it. It is in times of rapid change, and especially of adversity that competition becomes fierce and potentially internecine. It is important to remember that these situations are exceptional.

Spectacular innovation is a common occurrence in human affairs but very rare in nature because of the slowness of evolution. It can happen, though. When dogs were introduced into Australia (presumably by the first human inhabitants), their superior efficiency as predators led to the extinction of most of the indigenous Australian predators (but not, interestingly, of any of the prey species, which the dogs actually ate). In the same way the invention of the spinning jenny led to the extinction of the spinning wheel. There is a vital difference, however. It was the spinning wheel, not those who used it, that perished. A wolverine could not convert itself into a dog but a woman who earned her living by spinning on a wheel could, and many of them did become workers in a mechanised cotton mill. In wild nature innovation can indeed be catastrophic to some species but among human beings not. In human affairs it is processes, machinery or institutions that become extinct. People learn and adapt.

The other situation where competition becomes fierce and sometimes ugly, is where the external environment changes for the worse and a situation which was formerly in equilibrium is suddenly no longer. The market has contracted, the habitat has become smaller, the weather has changed for the worse, and there is less food than before.

There is a very important point to be noted here. Eugene Marais (the famous Afrikaans poet), in *The Soul of the Ape*, criticises the conventional view of the evolutionist of his time that the 'struggle for survival' is essentially a competitive struggle. The great enemy, as he points out, is inanimate nature, which will kill any living thing which is not able to cope with its challenges. The 'unfit' may be so – totally irrespective of any competition. If the climate becomes suddenly much colder some species and some individuals will not be able to survive. Those who were already suited to a colder climate and those that had the capacity to adapt, will survive – the others not. This is not a question of competition. Those who perished would have done so even if those who survived had not existed.

In the same way, by no means all failures in business can be attributed to competition. Many happen because the people concerned simply did not have all of what was required, lacking either material resources or skill or relying on innovations which failed or seeking to seize an opportunity which did not exist. Where successful innovation is highly desired and highly rewarded, unsuccessful attempts at innovation are bound to happen.

Having noted all these things, we cannot deny that situations do arise where competition can become very ugly indeed, in situations of catastrophe, like an earthquake, a rare and therefore unforeseeable flood or drought, or a total war. In such situations it is normal for governments to attempt to suspend the process of competition, by such extraordinary means as rationing and price control as well as more indirect measures such as allowing manufacturers to form cartels in order to reduce the severity of competition among themselves.

Few would deny that in situations of true emergency some such measures may be justified but there can be little doubt that in the real world such measures have done far more harm than good because they have tended to be continued after the emergency has passed, and to be applied in situations which were not true catastrophes.

The essence of a catastrophe is that it could not reasonably have been foreseen, and that it will pass. If either of these conditions is not present, suspension of competition is entirely destructive. Where a misfortune was foreseeable, like a 'normal' drought or flood, it is most inexpedient that those who foresaw it and took precautions should be punished and those who did not should be rewarded, which is what happens if the impact of the misfortune is to be shared equally. If this is done, it will simply ensure that people do not exercise foresight. This was very much the effect of 'drought relief measures' in South African agriculture which led farmers to plant more and more maize in sub-marginal areas where there was little likelihood of getting enough rainfall. Similarly, to compensate people who build on land which is known to be subject to regular flooding is simply to encourage others to do likewise.

When the change is not a passing catastrophe but signals the beginning of a new state of affairs which is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, interference with competition is particularly undesirable. We have noted that the great advantage that human beings have over other animals in facing change is their superior ability to adapt, and the competitive process is a powerful incentive to adapt. Where adaptation is needed the last thing that should be done is to punish those who do adapt and reward those who do not. History, right up to the present, is littered with cases where the effect of government intervention has been to postpone a necessary and inevitable change and in consequence, to make the final adjustment both more drastic and more damaging than it needed to be, like attempting to dam a river and eventually causing a flood when the dam bursts.

The general point is that competition is the most powerful incentive to people to do things right, to be efficient, to render good service, and also to exercise foresight and to make necessary adaptations to changing circumstances. We can live with the suspension of competition for a short time though even then a price has to be paid, but in the long term the price exacted by any interference with competition is itself disastrous.

The incentive effect of competition is, of course, the one point that the two kinds of competition have in common. Competition certainly makes rugby players play harder and runners run faster. That, as we have noted, was what it was originally for. Today it is very far from clear what it is for. If winning is the only thing, what is the point of winning? Why play rugby or run marathons in order to win when you can just as well spin coins? In spite of everything that is said to the contrary, it is difficult to escape the idea that games really are played for their own sake and not to win, although people certainly do care about winning.

To conclude, let us sum up the differences between ‘games type’ competition and ‘real world’ competition.

1. In games type competition the competitors are face to face, sometimes in actual conflict (as in boxing or rugby), always in direct contact. In real world competition one is only marginally aware of the competition. One is face to face with those with whom one co-operates.
2. Games are about competition and the purpose is to win. Business, or life in general, is not about competition and the purpose is not to win. Competition is part of the overall environment in which we pursue our actual goals – simply to live, to earn a living, to do a good job, perhaps to be famous as an outstanding practitioner of one’s art, but even that is not truly a competitive motive. Beethoven and Mozart were alive at the same time but were they in competition? Would either one be any less famous if the other had not lived?
3. In games those who do not win are losers. In competition there do not have to be losers. Some may fail irrespective of competition, some may fail as a result of competition but the great majority simply ‘hold their own’, meeting the standard that competition sets, being neither outstanding successes nor failures.

Finally we should notice that the idea dear to the sentimental Victorian socialists, like Galsworthy, that the poor are the ‘losers’ in capitalist competition, is hardly ever true. Typically in a developing society, the poor are newcomers who have come from a situation where they were even worse off (in Victorian England and contemporary South Africa, from the countryside to the towns, in modern America, from Mexico or Asia) in order to better themselves, making use of the opportunity which the prosperity of others creates for them. In the contemporary first world the poor are typically people who have been excluded by institutions the very purpose of which is to prevent them from competing (like minimum wages). So far from being the victims of competition, they are the victims of its absence.