

6. OUR RIGHTS

One of our keenest senses is the sense of injustice. People get pretty worked up when they feel they have been treated unjustly. They don't have to be taught what injustice is. I felt it even as a child. I felt it whenever accused of something I had not done. People feel it naturally when accorded certain types of treatment that they consider unjust. That has led to the development of a legal system in which the accused have an opportunity to be heard in their own defense, and the judgment is rendered by an impartial party. Thus is justice more likely done. In this country we demand such a procedure as a right.

Unfortunately our sensitivity to injustice is less keen, and is sometimes entirely absent, when it comes to the way other people are treated. We may indeed be entirely blind to injustice when it is the result of a system in which our own willing or unintended complicity may be involved. Minorities the world over are subject to unjust discrimination by majorities. Even worse are the situations in which there is unjust rule of majorities by minorities. We may indeed be sensitive to the latter situations and deplore them where we are in no way involved. Reform mindedness is more rare when it is our own institutions which are discriminatory. When we are on the other end and are being discriminated against ourselves, we suddenly feel injustice more keenly and demand our right to equal opportunities and equal treatment.

After all there is no basis for anyone to demand more or different rights than someone else is entitled to. Whatever we demand as a right we are obligated to respect and grant as a right of everyone else.

As we all do demand the right to be free from unjust treatment, so do we demand other rights. As has already been suggested, we demand the freedom to think differently from others if we happen to do so, and to adopt a different life style if we choose to do so. What comes naturally is the desire to be able to do anything we please, whatever anyone else says about it. Indeed we feel like telling others that they have no business having anything whatsoever to say about what we do, what we say or what we think. But of course we also want to be free to tell others off at any time. Clearly we can't have it both ways.

The question is, what rights can we legitimately demand in this world in which we do not live in isolation but live in continuous contact with and interdependency with other people. It should be obvious that we do not have the right to do whatever we damn well please without regard to how it affects other people. The old saying is that our rights stop at the end of the other person's nose. That is to say we do not have a right to harm

someone else. And it is also in our own interest that we do not have such a right. That is because, since our rights are also other people's rights, our only right to protection against harm from others lies in our giving up our right to harm them.

We can legitimately demand freedom from harm and from injustice, and by the same token we are not free to inflict harm or treat others unjustly. Are we and others then free to do anything else we please? Do we have no positive social obligations whatsoever, from which we ought not to be free?

We are all the inheritors of a civilization we did not make. What we can add to it is very small in comparison to what we have received. We cannot repay those previous generations who have passed so much on to us, both technologies that we do not have to reinvent but can use and improve, and a cultural storehouse so vast that a lifetime is not enough to enjoy all the great music or read all the great literature. We have not earned any right to all this, but we can preserve it and add our bit to it for succeeding generations. That would seem to be an obligation.

And then, if obligations go along with rights, as we ordinarily agree, there is the question of what if any obligation we have to our own generation. If any one of us had to go it alone in this world, our ability to do well alone would quickly be shown to be pitifully small. We could starve pretty quickly if cast adrift on our own. Almost all of what we possess is the fruit of a very complex set of economic relationships in which each person contributes some part. Even the so-called self-made man, who may indeed deserve much credit for the responsibilities he has shouldered and handled well, has in fact operated in a context in which the accomplishments for which he tends to take credit would not have been possible at all but for the cooperation of many other people who did much of the real hard work. He is the beneficiary of their efforts as much as they are of his.

We are all the economic beneficiaries of the efforts of others in this complex economy. It appears that the obligation we have to contribute our bit, whatever it can be, to the economic betterment of others of our own generation, is also in our own interest. Each person's own interest is served best by a system in which each helps to serve others. And although there will be no attempt to spell it out here, the same could be said with respect to any positive obligation to contribute to the betterment of other people, in ways other than economic or even cultural. We benefit from other people's actions in many ways, including their bearing of civic responsibilities, etc., and that creates similar obligations on our part which we have no right to ignore.

We have no right to demand freedom from all social obligations. We

have no right to do just whatever we please. But we can and do legitimately demand the right to have ample and fair opportunities to develop our own finer potentialities. That is indeed the only basic thing we have a right to demand of others and of society in general. This is indeed of great importance. It is certainly unjust to deny anyone opportunities to develop their fine potentialities. We should all have opportunities to do that. No legitimate case can be made for denying anyone such opportunities.

Having fair opportunities to do something legitimate rules out discrimination against us as unjust. And as has been said, it obliges us also to avoid discriminating against others similarly. The right to have ample opportunities means that we deserve more than one chance in life to do what we have a right to do and ought to do. Ample is a loose word, but it suggests more than just a second chance. It does not mean, however, that we can ruin a lot of chances and still demand more. To say that we should have ample opportunities lays upon others, and upon the society in general, a real obligation to provide such opportunities. That does not absolve us of efforts to create some opportunities for ourselves if we can. Indeed our demand lays upon us the obligation to try to help create such opportunities for others as well as for ourselves.

Some people seem to think that all we need opportunities for, all that such freedom is for and should be used for, is self-expression. We all need opportunities for self-expression, but there is room to question the character of the self-expression and its effects on our own development and on society. We and others need opportunities for development of certain kinds---not just for any type of development, for people can develop anti-social tendencies as well as finer ones.

When I talk about opportunities to develop fine potentialities, the adjective "fine" may be open to somewhat different interpretations. However, I submit that people do not really disagree a whole lot over what they consider to be a fine person. There would be somewhat of a consensus on what is not considered to be a fine character or a fine characteristic in a person. The old concept of the basic human virtues has not really been improved upon. We all think highly of some people and find them likable, while there are some other types of people that we would rather not have to have anything to do with if we could help it.

We would like everyone to develop what we consider fine potentialities, and we properly want opportunities to become such people ourselves. But it goes beyond just developing good personal qualities. We properly demand opportunities to develop our skills and to use them in socially beneficial ways. A fine person is indeed one that contributes to

others and to society, not one who disregards others and all social obligations.

To use again another concept discussed earlier, it is our creativity that we need opportunities to develop, provided that our creativity is used in ways that are or can be harmonized with the creativities of other people. No civilization has yet done as well as it might in providing all its members with fair and ample opportunities to develop their finer potentialities. A society will do better in this regard insofar as more people insist on their right to such opportunities, use them properly, and do their part to extend the same opportunities to other people as well.

Most of us do stand up for our own rights fairly well, though often not for the same rights of others. Danger arises when we demand, as a right, freedom to do whatever we please, and misuse the freedom we have or get. Our excess egoism can thus easily get the better of us, and then we fail to understand what we can legitimately demand as a right and what we cannot. We might better tailor our own demands for rights for ourselves to the rights we are actively championing for other people. That would be a good step in developing ourselves as the fine sort of person we would like others and ourselves to be.

A person is only doing what comes naturally if they decide they want to develop some particular skill that appeals to them, and to make their living using that skill. They may think that they have as much of a right to do so as anyone else, and feel it is unjust if they cannot do so. And indeed everyone has a right to try to make a living by any socially useful occupation, though not by any anti-social occupation that harms anyone. But there are times when the occupations some would choose are over crowded, and it is not sensible to enter them or to demand that one has a right to make a living in them. No one has any such right. It is necessary for people to learn what the needs of society are in terms of different occupational skills, and choose in which of these ways to serve others and so earn a livelihood. A fine potential is one that is socially useful.