

FREEDOM AND SPONTANEITY

I STOOD on the river-bank near Bablockhythe and watched a snake swim straight across the water. He was quite a small snake and made little stir, so that at first I saw only his head moving. It seemed odd in a fish to swim with its head out of the water. Every now and then he stopped dead, curved in the sun quite still; then was off again on his way to the opposite bank. In that silent and remote place the little live thing held all my attention. The form and movement were lovely of course, but they were not the cause of the fascination. They were only signals. What was fascinating was the appearance of Purpose, the way the silence and the swift, steady movement gave me the sense of something being done, a secret intention being followed with the entire body and soul of the creature.

It is always so with animals. They go so entirely to their ends. They are utterly absorbed in doing something. Hence their gravity, their sincerity, their entire lack of both humour and vulgarity. They may play but they do not joke, they may strut about before their females, but they are never self-conscious. They are wonderfully at ease. And how their actions interweave! A million actions and movements converged on that snake to make him swim the river at that precise moment, and he, displacing the water, was moving the whole Thames. All the river-life moved together. In fact, the whole earth moves together. Each movement needs all the rest and its very uniqueness is that on which all the rest hangs. A vast work is going on under our eyes; there is Something being done that brings millions of actions together inter-dependently. And we, when we notice, look on and wish we could join in.

For we do fundamentally want to join in; but in our own way, which is not the snakes' way nor the birds'. A

bird builds its nest, feeds its young and dies. It is absorbed in its small cycle. Its flight is like its colour, something that happens to it, the outward shining of its unique and particular being. Its only concern is with its job, which is precisely to be a part. It desires no more than this, and 'this' means being a part. Its action is only inter-action. Its action is for the sake of the whole, but it touches the whole by keeping strictly to its part; and it does this quite spontaneously, with no inner conflict at all. The end of the whole is the whole end of bird or snake. They are quite sincere and quite serious and quite un sentimental. Beautiful fanatics!

Why do we want to join in? Because we know that we, too, are each of us a part of the Whole. And knowing this we know that we ought to join in, that we must join in. But if we join in we must submit. If I am a part there is an end outside me, the end of the Whole, and my individuality does not count except in relation to the Whole. Hence I must serve and submit. Not, it is true, as the birds serve: 'You are of more value than many sparrows.' But somehow I must join in the work of the Whole; and somehow I must join differently. What is this difference? That Man is *free*, you say. But what does our Freedom really mean?

When people talk of Freedom nowadays they seem unable to get Hitler out of their minds. But we are not talking politics here. Sir Norman Angell recently wrote a little book¹ which may help by showing us exactly what we are not talking about. Sir Norman is not concerned with Man's place in the Universe. He is concerned with Man's place in the State. And he puts so clearly this aspect of the question that he absolves us from the necessity of wasting time saying it over again. His book can be summarised in two sentences, only one of which matters in

¹ *Why Freedom Matters.* (Penguin Special.)

this context; and that one runs as follows: Freedom matters because it is good for the mind, and it is good for the mind because it is a discipline for character and a tool for discovery. In other words, it is better for all concerned to listen to people than to muzzle them, to discuss things freely with them than to lock them up or run away; and a muzzled people will not do much in science or the arts. This is worth saying, but it is fairly obvious as a principle; and the modifications needed in practice are not my concern here. What does matter here is that Sir Norman considers Freedom only as a means, a means to the good life in this world. It is that condition in which alone men can grow up tolerant and rational, self-controlled and wide awake. To this we can murmur *Concedo* (or, at our most cautious, '*Transeat* . . . it depends what you mean in practice') and so pass on to think of something more difficult.

The question is not how I should join in the State, but how I should join in the Cosmos; and this is a question not of means but of the ultimate end. Sir Norman Angell has decided only that Freedom is a discipline, a tool; an instrument, a condition, a means; an aid to mental health. Whereas I am talking about what a man must do with his healthy mind if he is to join in the great business of the Cosmos. But this is to place Man against the widest possible background; it is to consider him simply as a Being; in his ultimate purpose and last end. Every man knows that his function in the Whole is his ultimate function. He knows that if he is to plunge into the Cosmos, to find his place in it, he must commit himself fundamentally and finally. The trouble is that he seems to start off *uncommitted*. From the start he seems detached, free; and, what is more important, this detachment seems part of his nature, something he cannot lose, something bound up in his knowledge of his own individual identity; and this seems essential. Yet he must take the plunge, commit himself, be determined, that is, by an end outside himself;

otherwise he remains alone, detached, solitary. To be undetermined is, for a creature, to be alone. It is the condition of not-loving. Absolutely speaking, we cannot reach that condition; but by a withdrawal of choice, of particularised willing, we can attempt to reach it. And people do make the attempt, more or less intensely. There is a perversion of freedom which finds a subtle pleasure in *not* deciding, in *not* desiring this or that, but only the *approach* to this or that: 'douceur d'être et de n'être pas.' To flirt and not commit oneself; there is a pleasure in going just so far, a pleasure that comes not with the tasting but with the drawing back, that accompanies the sense of one's superiority to this or that. You taste the object in order to taste your superiority in turning from it. Then there is the cult of intellectual indetermination which is sometimes a kind of snobbery. And, more rare than these, there is the kind of person (or could be) whom Dostoevsky depicts in *The Possessed*, Kirillov who was so obsessed by the thought of the primary freedom of his will, of its indetermination, that he had to kill himself in order to be quite sincere. He did not believe in God and so felt that he was able, if he chose, to be utterly undetermined. To kill himself for no reason at all seemed not only the purest form of self-will, but it was also to withdraw himself finally from all the particular goods that might determine him through his desire of them and so destroy his indetermination. It is the act of a man who insists, if there be no God, on becoming God himself; and then finds that he must kill himself because in no other way can he assert his sublime independence. The cult of indetermination, of this primary freedom of the will, ends precisely and logically in not being determined by anything; in holding back from everything; in Death. Only God need not commit Himself; if any creature refuses and is logical, it must commit suicide like Kirillov. It is not a mere flight from things, it is an attempt to be like God Who is above things; and Kirillov can make the attempt and is tempted to do

so because, by the freedom of his will, he is already, in a sense, above things too. The superiorities differ, but the man's is in the image and likeness of God's.

Man is not made noble by his indetermination to particular goods. He is not ennobled by a negation. He is noble because he has that direct, positive relation to the Universal Good of which this negation is a consequence. However proud we may feel of our freedom of choice, we cannot rest in it. We cannot properly speaking *do* anything in it. We are parts of the Whole and must join in. Kirillov behaved as if he were not a part, but then he did not believe in the Whole. At least he was consistent. He freed himself to death, dying of consistency. We, too, start perilously undetermined; but we go to something different. Yet we are all potential Kirillovs, and we never lose that divine mark on us which destines us to complete failure or complete success. Envy the spontaneity of snakes and swallows, we know in our hearts that we will never rest until, in our own way, we are as spontaneous, as free from inner divisions, as whole-hearted in our living, as they are; but also that we must reach our spontaneity by a different route because it will be a quite different spontaneity. Perfect spontaneity is the same as perfect sincerity. It is the state of a being whose action is his own and who acts as a whole. In this sense the actions of animals are not perfectly spontaneous, for though they act as wholes, without inner division, their actions are not really their own. They are not free, they are acted upon rather than active; and the reason is that they do not *know* the Whole before they begin to act. Their end is not in them when they begin; yet it must be in their beginning somehow (*omne agens agit propter finem*). Therefore, it must be *imposed* on them from the beginning. But we men possess the Whole in our idea of it; our end is in us when we begin to act as men; it is not merely in our beginning. Therefore, our actions are our own, we are to that extent spontaneous from the beginning. We join in

the whole not as mere parts, not as materials, but formally, as going straight to the Whole as Whole; not as mere means, but as going straight to the End as End. In the sight of that End we shall be wholly one and sincere (as we certainly are not now); but also, so far as creatures can be, we shall be self-moving. Certainly we shall be utterly determined by that End (this is why we shall be sincere, this is that spontaneity whose far-off likeness we love to see in snakes and birds), but, because we go to the End formally, therefore, Its determination of us to Itself is able to be our determination of ourselves to It. Our natural nobility makes possible that supernatural 'liberty of the glory of the children of God'; in which we shall love God with the very love with which He loves Himself. And this is the love that moves the sun and the other stars.

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