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An Unfinished Trial

IN HIS BOOK *The State versus Socrates* John D. Montgomery writes: "When the Athenians condemned Socrates to die because of his ideas, they placed themselves forever on trial."

That trial started 2,369 years ago, and today it involves all mankind. The issues before the judges on the hill at Athens were these: the search for ongoing truth versus stagnant orthodoxy; the belief in a supreme Good versus veneration of a multitude of tribal and local deities; and tolerance versus intolerance.

These disputed points have not been resolved. The world's plight is evidenced by intellectual uncertainty, social disorganization, and international chaos. Instead of getting together for reflective examination and constructive action, nations and people indulge in obstinacy, estrangement, and discord.

Who and what was this man Socrates, who created the intellectual and moral traditions which have cast their light over the ages and have contributed so greatly to civilization?

He was the most eminent of the Greek philosophers, but he was not a visionary. He served with boldness in the army, and two of his friends owed their lives to his courage in battle. When his turn came to hold political office, he was resolute in withstanding public clamour, and during the reign of the Thirty Tyrants he risked his life by refusing to join in their plan to liquidate political opponents.

Socrates occupied his life with oral instruction, conversing with all and sundry, seeking the truth and fostering the exposure of pride and error.

No line has survived that is of his own writing. If he carved any statues in his early days as a stone-cutter, they are unknown. He spurned shoddy thinking and sought to lead those with whom he talked to search their own minds for answers and illumination. He gave no finished catalogue of the principles in life, but imparted the impulse to search for them.

Socrates was destroyed by a decaying society, whose rulers could not tolerate enlightened examination of their ways and beliefs. He was accused of corrupting the Athenian youth, of making innovations in the

religion of the Greeks, and of ridiculing the many gods whom the Athenians worshipped. This last charge arose out of Socrates' belief in the existence of one Supreme God, the Maker and Governor of the world, and when he spoke of his belief in One God it seemed to those who ruled in Athens like a new religion.

Three jealous and envious men, representing the poets, the artisans and the orators, laid trumped-up charges and had Socrates tried before the tribunal of the 500. He was convicted by a narrow margin — "if only thirty votes had gone otherwise," he said, "I should have been acquitted." And so he drank the hemlock and died.

Tolerance of ideas

The story of Socrates is not so much an argument for freedom of speech as it is a lesson in the need for tolerance of ideas. It was bigotry, which is blind and obstinate adherence to opinions even in the face of competent conflicting evidence, that led to his prosecution.

The primitive urge to injure someone with whose opinions or beliefs we do not agree is not yet dead. Socrates was the only man in Athens who suffered death for his opinions, though others were punished by banishment. Contrast that with the roster of those who have been tortured and killed for their beliefs in the world in recent centuries.

Some people, even in this advanced age, are driving through life with their wind-screens so clouded with prejudice and bigotry that they are dangerous drivers, dangerous to others as well as to themselves. Moreover, they are seeing little of the beauties in life.

Prejudice is a judgment or opinion formed beforehand or without due examination. Educated men of intelligence recognize the danger, and take steps to avoid it. Dr. Hans Selye says in *From Dream to Discovery*: "What we really mean by the 'unprejudiced mind' of the scientist is a mentality that has control over its numerous prejudices, and is always willing to reconsider them in the face of contrary evidence."

Prejudices, which have been called the stone walls of narrow-mindedness, do not survive under honest appraisal. If an opinion is right, it will bear the test of examination; if it is wrong, the sooner we get rid of it the better.

Some prejudices arise from fear. Fear of being incompetent, of not making good, of not reaching the top of the business pyramid: these keep some people everlastingly on the look-out for critical comment or envious looks. And when we are fearful, how easy is a bush supposed a bear.

Prejudice that stems from fear abridges our freedom. Socrates said to his judges: "I did not think it right to behave through fear unlike a free-born man." To be always clad in the galling armour of suspicion is more painful and burdensome than to run the risk of suffering now and then a transient injury. All that has made man great has sprung from the attempt to secure what he believes to be worth while, not from the struggle to avert what was thought to be fearful.

Bigotry and prejudice do not end with deforming the life of the person indulging in them. People have a zealous craving to impress their individualities upon others. Much of our personal, community, national and international turmoil springs from our thinking that what is good for us should be imposed upon everyone else.

The heaviest price we have to pay for something that we consider greatly worth while — freedom of speech — is listening to the uses to which some people put the freedom. Our ears are assailed by ill-educated people who refuse to learn, by graceless people who demand to be fed and then bite the hand that feeds them, and by fanatical people with fixed ideas.

The mob is a device ideal for such people. It provides an incognito to save a person from the vexation of thinking and to cover him up so that he can melt away into the crowd once whatever is bothering him is off his chest. Here is a paradox: a member of a mob hates order and loves it. He expresses detestation of the "establishment" which is the model of orderliness, but he likes the orderliness which allows him the opportunity to express himself.

Socrates had watched the state deteriorate, and he set himself to think out how it could be saved. He saw that the men he talked to were yielding to what must be deadly to a free state: control by the uncontrolled. Salvation of the state must come about, not by mass movements against war or poverty or evil but in terms of every separate person. Men are free, he believed, not when liberated from this or that outside rule, but when they are masters of themselves.

Being one of a crowd has this further advantage to the ignorant or lazy mind: a mob does not demand facts and evidence. On the contrary, it is swayed by the interest of the moment and by prejudices that make a mockery of reason, intelligence and tolerance. People shout for what at the moment they think are their rights, and they want these to the exclusion of

what anybody else may want or have the right to.

There are three sorts of extremists involved in mob action. Some are alienated from all causes and are merely there for the thrill. Some earnestly believe that if something old and established disappears a lovely utopian paradise will appear spontaneously. Some people are trying to jump on the surf-board on a new wave.

These people do not allow the thought to enter their minds that non-conformity is not a virtue all by itself. They lose touch with the fundamental principle that all sides of a case must be heard before a reasonable man can reach a just conclusion. They have no qualms about using against any public figure the technique of character assassination directed against Socrates. Their words are prompted by envy and tipped with the poison of malice.

Judging good and bad

"Good" and "bad" are not two labels which can be applied definitely to certain things and acts. Something that is good in one set of circumstances may be bad in another. Almost every situation we have to deal with is mixed both in the causes that have brought it about and in the values it embodies.

Criticizing people is unhealthy for the critic. He develops such a keen scent that amid a thousand excellences he smells out a solitary defect and holds it up to mockery. He becomes a scavenger. When Churchill was building a wall he put one such critic in his place. Told that the wall was crooked, Churchill said: "Any fool can see what's wrong. But can you see what's right?"

There is no surer sign of a great mind than that it refuses to display intolerance of annoying expressions, but straightway ascribes them to the defective knowledge of the speaker, and so merely observes without feeling them.

There are some people who truly believe that their competence in one art or science or technology gives them ability to pronounce verdicts on totally different things. Apelles, the celebrated Greek painter, gave an answer to one of these know-alls which is used to this day. A cobbler, having found fault with the drawing of a shoe-buckle in one of the artist's paintings, went on to criticize the drawing of the legs. Apelles said: "The cobbler should stick to his last."

What tolerance is

Tolerance is the cordial and positive effort to understand another's beliefs, practices and habits without necessarily accepting them, and the making of allowances for errors in thought and act.

Tolerance allows free trade in ideas. It stands firmly on both sides of every great issue, insisting on the right of their supporters to be heard, until there is enough hard evidence to support a reasonable judgment.

Tolerance takes note of the differences in people's upbringing, education and experiences. It is broad-minded. It gives latitude to the beliefs which others hold. In 17th Century England there was a sect called Latitudinarians which sought a theological basis broad enough for men of different views to unite upon. This reminds us of the ancient maps of the world which found room for monsters, ships, flying fish, and a sea-god combing his hair, in addition to the outlines of continents and, in the unexplored territories, the warning "Here are lions."

Tolerant people know that there is hardly a vice or a crime, according to today's moral standard, which has not at some time or other in some circumstances been looked upon as a moral and religious duty, and there is scarcely a virtue practised by us today which was not, in some civilizations, looked upon as a sin.

We have learned by experience in this century to be tolerant of breakthroughs which are announced in the natural sciences. At the time of ancient Greece, a progressive philosopher was punished with banishment for teaching that the sun was a ball of fire as big perhaps as the entire country of Greece; and the greatest discovery ever made by man, the law of the attraction of gravity, was attacked in the 17th Century as being subversive of natural religion.

But the toleration needed in these days does not consist alone in listening indulgently to other peoples' views and extending appreciation to those who announce discoveries. It is not enough to say sanctimoniously that every man is entitled to his opinion: we must add respect, for to him his opinion is important.

This broadening of tolerance implies magnanimity. Raphael expressed the true spirit when he declared that he drew men and women, not as they were, but as they ought to be. Goethe went a step further: "Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them to become what they are capable of being."

Law and justice

It is because human nature has changed so little that the Ten Commandments, enacted to meet the needs of a nation shifting from a nomadic culture through Egyptian slavery into an agricultural kingdom, still have meaning in today's skyscraper environment.

There are some lofty magisterial people who assert that so long as men and women live according to the law there will be no need for toleration, but tolerance is more than mere legality.

It comes naturally to the man of true culture to have a deep respect for the legal forms which make human contact practicable. But the man of culture recognizes, in addition, respect for many unwritten laws, some of them unenforceable except by conscience. He knows that the search for justice is a search for moral law and values above men and their

legalistic societies, and tolerance is founded upon justice. St. Thomas Aquinas declared: "Justice is a constant and perpetual will to yield to each one his right."

Everyone who aspires to be cultured should be glad that mercy and the search for truth are parts of justice, if for no other reason than that he who punishes another man for ignorance might justly be himself punished by those who know more than he does.

Using intelligence

Ignorance has no social function. Only intelligence can make our young people sharers in the shaping of their fates, and intelligence consists in knowing and loving what reason shows to be right and true.

The truth about anything cannot be discovered by escaping from the real, any more than the stupid fellow escaped from the biting fleas by putting out the candle so that they should not see him.

We live in a changing world about which our knowledge is incomplete, and we are finding that the key to civilization is not technology but wisdom. One of the great evidences that a man is civilized is his wanting to know and to understand. If he is going to be intolerant about anything, it seems on the whole better to know, exactly, what he is going to be intolerant of. When he says: "I do not know" he is being intellectually honest. Socrates did not claim to have wisdom, but only to seek it.

The argument against intolerance is not a moral argument. It rests solidly upon the simple consideration that it is humanly impossible to know all the facts.

It is wise, therefore, to leave some matters in suspense. To say that something is impossible is to assert, with rash presumption, that we know the limits of possibility. To condemn an act as sinful is to make unjust pretensions to a faculty of perfect judgment which does not belong to our human nature.

Our wrong thinking about things, and not the influx of new ideas about things, can be blamed for much of the trouble of our time. The right to think for ourselves requires that we try to understand things and how things work rather than classify them as "good" or "bad" according to some current guidebook to values.

This means replacing fixations by willingness to explore and to question. A philosopher remarked: "Had it occurred to Menelaus to consider that he would be better off if he were rid of such a wife as Helen there would have been no Trojan war."

Enough misunderstandings occur by accident to urge us to be careful to avoid those which can be avoided. Sir Thomas Malory tells us in *Le Morte d'Arthur* about an illustrative incident. When a snake struck a knight, he drew his sword to kill it. The drawn sword alarmed the armies, broke up the peace talks between King Arthur and Sir Mordred, and started a battle in which both leaders were killed.

Inner court of revision

Consideration of the proper manner of thinking carries us back to the teaching of Socrates. He never considered establishing an institution to seek the truth, believing it to be something found only by a man within himself. Everyone should have an inner court of revision in which he can examine and cross-examine his judgments.

A happy life is impossible except through a certain agreement between internal convictions and external circumstances, a compromise between the ideal and the practical, but everyone should inform himself of what his ideal is. That will help him to assess other values and to avoid becoming intolerant.

Tolerance is absolutely essential to civilization as we know it. We must admit, because we see signs of it on every side, that, as the Chinese philosopher Lao Tse said, our gentler manners and garments only thinly disguise the still savage hearts of uncivilized people.

Mankind is in one of its moods of shifting its outlook. The compulsion of tradition has lost much of its force, but civilization is at best a fragile thing, and to embark upon a challenge to a way of life which is based upon centuries of experience is to endanger what little security we have.

Success will not be gained by demands for censorship and the silencing of opinions, but by grappling with the problems in a spirit of seeking to ennoble life. The creation of a civilized world order will be the victory of persuasion over force. That effort requires a certain amount of goodwilled tolerance.

As to knowing what to seek, this is summed up in the teachings of all the great religions and philosophies: Virtue consists in knowledge of the Good, which implies the effort to realize it.

Seeking solutions

It may not be possible to solve all the problems that beset human beings compelled to live together on this increasingly crowded earth, and recent exploration has shown the unlikelihood of escaping to another planet. We can, however, aim at developing our capacity to live with the problems without becoming as neurotic as many of those who declaim against the problems without sincerely seeking their solution.

As things are, we accept as colleagues many people we do not love, and with whom we should not like to live in close relations. But we work out a *modus vivendi*, a way of living, an arrangement or compromise by means of which persons or parties who differ greatly are enabled to get on together for a time while a permanent adjustment is being sought.

As a man, Socrates deserves much praise, but he can also be held accountable for a large part of the misunderstanding between him and his contemporaries. While insisting on the value of free dis-

ussion, he made visible his superiority of mind, with the irritating habit of exposing the ignorance of his fellow citizens in public. He might have said, as did the intolerant Napoleon: "No one but myself can be blamed for my fall. I have been my own greatest enemy, the cause of my own disastrous fate."

Moderation and concession are needed by everyone in the tolerant society. Moderation involves putting whatever we say or do in its proper place relevant to what is said and done by other people.

If we do not resist blindly what may seem an unfavourable action toward us; if we try to see it in the same light as the other side sees it, we may discover some negotiable points. As the down-to-earth gardener says in Sir Walter Scott's *Rob Roy*: "The tane gies up a bit, and the tither gies up a bit, and a' friends again."

As to concessions, the rules are: "Can this be yielded without putting the main issue in danger? Sacrifice details in order to win principles. One can often get what one wants — the other man's way."

To be great

It has been said that history turns on small hinges, and so do people's lives. It is in little things that your tolerance shows.

It is a good rule of life not to talk about your principles, but to act them out, to be in manner gentle, in mood humane, in outlook broad and comprehending. To avoid intolerance of your own opinions and acts, give people reason to have faith in your good intentions and your broadmindedness.

With every rise in status in business, public, or private life there falls upon men and women an increased demand for tolerance and clemency. Small men and women, absorbed in small personal affairs, do not experience the special obligations of greatness.

Those who display intolerance are pushing time back a thousand years, though they think of themselves as being *avant garde*. The Athenians repented their sentence on Socrates when it was too late. They punished his accusers, and erected a statue of bronze in one of the most public parts of the city. But they could neither halt the enlightenment he had started nor make amends for their own intolerance.

We cannot take for granted such civilization as we have attained, but must explicitly guard it against the eruption of barbarism and moral chaos. We need to make an effort to find the essential ideas which will give meaning and order to the discordant and confused mass of details in the world around us. We can only do so by listening to and trying to understand the several sides there are to every proposal for change.

We need to practise tolerance in private life as well as in public life, in small matters as well as in great, because of the seeming paradox that intolerance is the one thing we cannot tolerate if we would remain free.