

requires unquestioning obedience to a superior, or selling himself into slavery to another. Such an action would amount to a kind of suicide, a defeat of what makes each human being unique and equally valuable.

The self-image may be sustained by the thought that each individual has the same share of human reason, and an equal right to deploy this reason in the conduct of his or her own life. Yet the 'autonomous' individual, gloriously independent in his decisionmaking, can easily seem to be a fantasy. Not only the Grand Unifying Pessimisms, but any moderately sober reflection on human life and human societies, suggest that we are creatures easily swayed, constantly infected by the opinions of others, lacking critical self-understanding, easily gripped by fantastical hopes and ambitions. Our capacity for self-government is spasmodic, and even while we preen ourselves on our critical and independent, free and rational decisions, we are the slaves of fashion and opinion and social and cultural forces of which we are ignorant. It would often be good, and no signal of disrespect to ourselves, if those who know better could rescue us from our worst follies.

Ethics

Perhaps, then, a more realistic defence of the freedoms we want to protect avoids the fantasy of our rational freedom. A more realistic defence might be just glum about the possibility of Plato's elite. The old question from the Roman writer Juvenal's sixth *Satire* (c. AD 116) surfaces: who shall guard the guardians? Winston Churchill is supposed to have said that democracy is the worst system of government ever invented - except for all the others. Nobody can be trusted to have unlimited power over another, nor to govern in the interests of others. The elite are human too. The grim histories of anti-democratic politics stand as awful reminders of the dangers in Plato's aristocratic myth. Plato himself perfectly well knew this about the real world. The guardians of his imagined world can only merit their role by an impracticable process of the most rigorous education. Plato does not provide any consoling myth at all for the jumped-up dictator who claims to know what is best for the people

Democratic politicians may be bad enough, but those sheltering behind a claim to know what is best for us are apt to be a lot worse.

Even in democracies, however, there are fascinating relics of the Platonic image of the guardians. The democratic United States has its process of 'judicial review', whereby the legal mandarins of the Supreme Court oversee and strike out democratically voted legislation. This is done in the name of the Constitution, this being a document to whose meaning the legal mandarins alone have privileged access. The parallel with a priesthood and its private access to the truth of the sacred texts is lost on many.

A dislike of elitism is also, typically, a dislike of paternalism: of being told what to do in our own interest. We naturally think of ourselves as the best judges of our own interest, and this will be part of our conception of ourselves as self-governing, rational individuals. On the other hand, in our hearts we know that sometimes it is better if our judgements are overridden, just as it is better for children that theirs are sometimes overridden. Safety legislation makes the worker wear a helmet or a safety harness, whether he wants to or not. Social security systems make people pay towards their support in old age, whether they want to or not. Most people accept seat-belt and motorcycle-helmet laws. These all represent restrictions on an agent's freedom made in the name of the agent's own good. But as we have seen, we can always reinvoke the word in explaining what the restrictions are good for. Social security gives us freedom from poverty in old age; safety laws give us freedom from death and destruction due to risks which we are apt to ignore.

As in the abortion debate, a little awareness of ethics will make us mistrustful of sound-bite-sized absolutes. Even sacred freedoms meet compromises, and take us into a world of balances. Free speech is sacred. Yet the law does not protect fraudulent speech, libellous speech, speech describing national secrets, speech inciting racial and other hatreds, speech inciting panic in crowded places,

Some ethical ideas