

Self-Will

There is one virtue that I love, and only one. I call it self-will. -I cannot bring myself to think so highly of all the many virtues we read about in books and hear about from our teachers. True, all the virtues man has devised for himself might be subsumed under a single head: obedience. But the question is: whom are we to obey? For self-will is also obedience. But all the other virtues, the virtues that are so highly esteemed and praised, consist in obedience to manmade laws. Self-will is the only virtue that takes no account of these laws. A self-willed man obeys a different law, the one law I hold absolutely sacred - the law in himself, his own "will."

It is a great pity that self-will should be held in such low esteem! Do men think well of it? Oh no, they regard it as a vice or at best as a deplorable aberration. They call it by its eloquent full name only where it arouses antagonism and hatred. (Come to think of it, true virtues always arouse antagonism and hatred. Witness Socrates, Jesus, Giordano Bruno, and all other self-willed men.) When anyone is in some measure inclined to evaluate self-will as a virtue or at least as an estimable quality, he gives it a more acceptable name. "Character" or "personality" doesn't sound as crude, not to say sinful, as "self-will"; "originality" will do in a pinch, though only in connection with tolerated eccentrics, artists and such. In art, where self-will represents no discernible threat to capital and society, it is highly prized under the name of originality; indeed, a certain self-will is regarded as positively desirable in artists and rewarded with high prices. In other contexts, however, the language of our day employs the words "character" or "personality" for a very odd phenomenon, to wit, something which can be exhibited and decorated but which on every halfway important occasion is very careful to bow to the laws of society. A man who has a few notions and opinions of his own but does not live in accordance with them is said to have character. He intimates in subtle ways that he thinks differently, that he has ideas of his own. In this mild form, hardly separable from vanity, character is regarded as a virtue even in a man's own lifetime. But if a man has ideas of his own and actually lives by them, he loses his favorable "character" certificate and is said to be merely "self-willed." But suppose we take the word literally. What does self-willed mean? It means "having a will of one's own."

Everything on earth, every single thing, has its will. Every stone, every blade of grass, every flower, every shrub, every animal grows, lives, moves, and feels in accordance with its "self-will," and that is why the world is good, rich, and beautiful. If there are flowers and fruits, oaks and birches, horses and chickens, tin and iron, gold and coal, it is because every thing, great and small, bears within itself its own "will," its own law, and follows this law surely and unswervingly.

There are only two poor accursed beings on earth who are excluded from following this eternal call and from being, growing, living, and dying as an inborn and deeply ingrained self-will commands. Only man and the domestic animals he has tamed are condemned to obey, not the law of life and growth, but other laws that are made by men and from time to time broken and changed by men. And the strangest part of it is that those few who have disregarded these arbitrary laws to follow their own natural law have come to be revered as heroes and liberators - though most of them were persecuted in their lifetime. The same mankind, which praises obedience to its arbitrary laws as the supreme virtue of the living

reserves its eternal pantheon for those who have defied those, laws and preferred to die rather than betray their "self-will."

"Tragedy," that sublime, mystic, and sacred word descended from the mythical youth of man and so monstrously abused by our journalists, signifies the fate of the hero who meets his doom because he follows his own star in opposition to the traditional laws. Through tragic heroes and through them alone man has time and time again gained insight into his inner being, his "self-will." Time and time again a tragic hero, a self-willed man, has shown the millions of common men, of cowards, that disobedience to the decrees of man is not gross irresponsibility but fidelity to a far higher, sacred law. In other words: the human herd instinct demands adaptation and subordination - but for his highest honors man elects not the meek, the pusillanimous, the supine, but precisely the self-willed men, the heroes.

Just as reporters abuse the language when they term some senseless accident "tragic" (which for those clowns is synonymous with "deplorable"), it is an abuse of language to say - as is now fashionable, especially among stay-at-homes - that our poor soldiers, slaughtered at the front, died a "heroic death." That is sentimentality. Of course the soldiers who died in the war are worthy of our deepest sympathy. Many of them did great things and suffered greatly, and in the end they paid with their lives. But that does not make them "heroes." The common soldier, at whom an officer bellows as he would at a dog, is not suddenly transformed into a hero by the bullet that kills him. To suppose that there can be millions of "heroes" is in itself an absurdity.

The obedient well-behaved citizen who does his duty is not a "hero." Only an individual who has fashioned his "self-will," his noble, natural inner law, into his destiny can be a hero. "Destiny and cast of mind are words for the same thing," said Novalis, one of the profoundest and least-known German thinkers. But only a hero finds the courage to fulfill his destiny.

If the majority of men possessed this courage and self-will, the earth would be a different place. No, say our paid teachers (the same who are so adept at praising the heroes and self-willed men of former times), everything would be topsy-turvy. But in reality life would be richer and better if each man independently followed his own law and will. In such a world, it is true, some of the insults and unreflecting blows that keep our venerable judges so busy today might go unpunished. Now and then a murderer might go free - but doesn't that happen now in spite of all our laws and punishments? On the other hand, many of the terrible, unspeakably sad, and insane things that we witness today in our so well ordered world would be unknown and impossible. Such as wars between nations.

Now I hear the authorities saying: "You preach revolution."

Wrong again. Such a mistake is possible only among herd men. I preach self-will, not revolution. How could I want a revolution? Revolution is war; like all other war, it is a "prolongation of politics by other means." But a man who has once felt the courage to be himself, who has heard the voice of his own destiny, cares nothing for politics, whether it be monarchist or democratic, revolutionary or conservative! He is concerned with something else. His self-will, like the profound, magnificent, God-given self-will that inhabits every blade of grass, has no other aim than his own growth. "Egoism," if you will. But very different from the sordid egoism of those who lust for money or power.

A man endowed with the "self-will" I have in mind does not seek money or power. He despises them, but not because he is a paragon of virtue or a resigned altruist. Far from it! The truth is simply that money, power, and all the possessions for which men torment and ultimately shoot each other mean little to one who has come to himself, to a self-willed man. He values only one thing, the mysterious power in himself, which bids him, live and helps him to grow. This power can be neither preserved nor increased nor deepened by money and power, because money and power are the inventions of distrust. Those who distrust the life-giving force within them, or who have none, are given to compensate through such substitutes as money. When a man has confidence in himself, when all he wants in the world is to live out his destiny in freedom and purity, he comes to regard all those vastly overestimated and far too costly possessions as mere accessories, pleasant perhaps to have and make use of, but never essential.

How I love the virtue of self-will! Once you have learned to treasure it and discovered some parcel of it in yourself, all the most highly commended virtues become strangely questionable.

Patriotism is one of these. I have nothing against it. For the individual it substitutes a larger complex. But it is truly prized as a virtue only in time of war — that naïve and absurdly inadequate means of "prolonging politics." The soldier who kills enemies is always regarded as a greater patriot than the peasant who tills his land to the best of his ability. Because the peasant derives advantage from what he does. And in our strange system of morality a virtue that is useful or profitable to its possessor is always held in suspicion.

Why? Because we are accustomed to seek profit at the cost of others. Because, distrustful as we are, we are always obliged to covet what belongs to someone else.

The savage believes that the vital force of the enemy he kills passes into him. All war, competition, and mistrust among men seem to spring from just such a primitive belief. We should be happier if we looked upon the poor peasant as at least the soldier's equal! If we could overcome our superstitious belief that the life or joy of life acquired by any man or people must necessarily be taken away from another man or people!

But now I hear our friend the teacher: "That sounds all very well, but now I must ask you to consider the matter objectively, from the economic standpoint! World production is ... "

To which I reply: "No, thank you. The economic standpoint isn't the least bit objective; it is a glass through which one can see all sorts of things. Before the war, for example, economic considerations were invoked to prove that a world war was impossible or that if one did break out it could not last long. Today, again on economic grounds, I can prove the opposite. No, let's forget such fantasies for once and think in terms of realities!"

None of these "standpoints," whatever we may wish to call them and whatever the girth of the professor who professes them, gets us anywhere. They all offer uncertain ground. We are not adding machines or any other kind of machines. For a man there is only one natural standpoint, only one natural criterion. And that is self-will. The destiny of the self-willed man can be neither capitalism nor socialism, neither England nor America; his only living destiny is the

silent, ungainsayable law in his own heart, which comfortable habits make it so hard to obey but which to the self-willed man is destiny and godhead.

Hermann Hesse "Self-Will", in: If the War Goes On: Reflections on War and Politics, Translated by Ralph Manheim, Noonday N 407, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970/71, PT 2617, E85, K6713, pp. 79-85. The book is out of print.

Reprinted by HHP for non-profit educational purposes, 12/13/2000