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The Freeman is published ten times a year by the Foundation for Economic Education, Irvington-on-Hudson, NY 10533. FEE is a non-political, non-profit educational champion of private property, the free market, and limited government.

A simple contribution of \$39 or more annually will bring each issue of *The Freeman* to your door. For foreign delivery, please add \$10.

The Freeman is available on microfilm from University Microfilm International, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

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Cover photo by Greg Leaman

PERSPECTIVE

Nock Revisited

Some books and essays require regular re-reading. In the course of our busy lives, we can allow their subtle wisdom to fade into the landscape and lose their initial effect. A work of this kind is easy to spot: it is fresh and sparkling on every subsequent reading; each encounter with it feels like the first.

For me, Albert Jay Nock's masterly essay "On Doing the Right Thing" is one of those works. (Written in 1924, it is reprinted in the Nock collection *The State of the Union: Essays in Social Criticism*, edited by Charles H. Hamilton and published by Liberty Fund.)

Nock's essay is a reminder that the advocates of the paternalistic state, whether "left" or "right," have it backward: good conduct isn't a *precondition* of freedom; it is a *consequence* of freedom. He contrasts the "region of conduct" regulated by force, that is, by government, with the region regulated by the individual's sense of "doing the right thing."

Nock wrote, "The point is that *any* enlargement [of the first region], good or bad, reduces the scope of individual responsibility, and thus retards and cripples the education which can be a product of nothing but the free exercise of moral judgment. Like the discipline of the army, again, any such enlargement, good or bad, depraves this education into a mere routine of mechanical assent. The profound instinct against being 'done for our own good' . . . is wholly sound. Men are aware of the need of this moral experience as a condition of growth, and they are aware, too, that anything tending to ease it off from them, even for their own good, is to be profoundly distrusted. The practical reason for freedom, then, is that freedom seems to be the only condition under which any kind of substantial moral fibre can be developed."

Across the political spectrum, social engineers think they need to deprive us of free-



dom in order to make us moral. So they use the law to keep us from “discriminating,” gambling, taking drugs, smoking in restaurants, abstaining from helping others, leaving our seat belts unbuckled, you name it.

Nock saw through this long ago: “Freedom, for example, as they keep insisting, undoubtedly means freedom to drink oneself to death.” But “it also means freedom to say with the gravedigger in *Les Misérables*, ‘I have studied, I have graduated; I never drink.’ . . . [F]reedom to do the one without correlative freedom to do the other is impossible; and that just here comes in the moral education which legalism and authoritarianism, with their denial of freedom, can never furnish.”

Of course, some people will choose badly. Nock wasn’t naïve. But rather than wallowing in that fact, he “turns to contemplate those men and women who act responsibly decent, decent by a strong, fine, self-sprung consciousness of the Right Thing, and . . . declares [the] conviction that the future lies with them.”

The Nockian understands that it is not the threat of state action that keeps most people decent. He “does not believe that any considerable proportion of human beings will promptly turn into rogues and adventuresses, sots and strumpets, as soon as they find themselves free to do so; but quite the contrary.”

Nock concluded that the purpose of his advocating freedom was nothing less than “that men may become as good and decent, as elevated and noble, as they might be and really wish to be.”

The lesson of Nock’s essay is that champions of the freedom philosophy need never be silenced by the charge that freedom makes vice possible—for without freedom, there can be no virtue.

* * *

Thirty years ago, in modest New England surroundings, an important intellectual revival began. Richard Ebeling details the significance of Austrian economics, a pillar of the freedom philosophy.

Some prominent politicians cast aspersions at corporations that move to Bermuda to reduce their taxes. One presidential candidate would block such moves. Robert Stewart sees things differently.

What could be more sensible than believing that “buying American” is good for Americans? Robert Carreira shows that things aren’t always what they seem.

The Progressive Era was a turning point for the formerly near-laissez-faire United States. But how exactly did it turn America around? Fred Smith has an evolutionary analysis.

Is it okay to download copyrighted music from the Internet without permission? What would economist Ludwig von Mises have said? Bettina Bien Greaves looks for clues in Mises’s writings on copyrights.

The self-described advocates for the world’s poor despise trade and globalization. But what do the poor themselves think? You might be surprised by what Jim Peron found out.

People expect economists to be able to read tea leaves, and many economists encourage that expectation. Arthur Foulkes says let’s get real.

In the columns department, Richard Ebeling remembers World War I. Donald Boudreaux demonstrates that a trade deficit is not debt. Robert Higgs recounts a unique land-privatization program. Walter Williams utters the S-word (secession). And James Otteson, reading a psychologist’s claims that choice is bad for us, replies, “It Just Ain’t So!”

Our reviewers have been perusing books on principles of government, choice in education, free trade, and capitalists who undermine capitalism.

—SHELDON RICHMAN