

## Flight from Responsibility

**W**henever I catch myself admiring a thinker, I find that he shares a trait with other thinkers I admire: an insistence on clear and honest language, a determination not to take metaphors literally.

Apropos of this, September marks the 106th anniversary of the birth of FEE's founding president, Leonard E. Read, a good time for me to recall a favorite essay of his, "On That Day Began Lies."\*

Read got his title from a passage in Leo Tolstoy's *The Law of Love and the Law of Violence*, which opens the essay:

From the day when the first members of councils placed exterior authority higher than interior, that is to say, recognized the decisions of men united in councils as more important and more sacred than reason and conscience; on that day began lies that caused the loss of millions of human beings and which continue their unhappy work to the present day.

Read found within that quote a clue worth following, a clue to what was wrong with a world wracked by war, power, insecurity, and oppression, all at the expense of freedom, creativity, and prosperity. For Read, lies—the denial of truth—must be implicated for the sorry state of affairs, for they could not be the result of a striving for "intellectual integrity."

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He asked: "Is it possible that there is something of a wholly destructive nature which has its source in councilmanic, or in group, or in committee-type action? Can this sort of thing generate lies that actually cause the loss of 'millions of human beings'?" He believed so.

"In what manner, then, do 'the decisions of men united in councils' tend to initiate lies?" Read replied that even decent individuals, once joined in a group, can be tempted to shed their self-discipline and find immunity from responsibility in the myth that it is the *association*, not they individually and personally, that acts. The perils of literalizing that metaphor are obvious at once. Read explained:

Persons advocate proposals in association that they would in no circumstance practice in individual action. Honest men, by any of the common standards of honesty, will, in a board or a committee, sponsor, for instance, legal thievery—that is, they will urge the use of the political means to exact the fruits of the labor of others for the purpose of benefiting themselves, their group, or their community.

These leaders, for they have been elected or appointed to a board or a committee, do not think of themselves as having sponsored legal thievery. They think of the board, the committee, the council, or the association as having taken the action. The onus of the act, to their way

\*It was excerpted in the May 1998 issue of *The Freeman* and is also online at [www.fee.org/vnews.php?nid=4018](http://www.fee.org/vnews.php?nid=4018).

of thinking, is put on an abstraction which is what a board or an association is without persons.

Strictly speaking, to say that an association decided such and such, is a lie. Further lies grow out of the nearly inevitable compromises made when the association strives to reach agreement. Read bolsters his point by describing a million-member organization whose governing body proclaims its stand on a matter. There's a small chance of unanimity, but the claim that the position represents the convictions of every member is "in all probability . . . an untruthful statement."

## Blind Faith in Majority Wisdom

He goes on to point out some other features of decision-making by committee. (He is primarily concerned with voluntary associations that take "stands" on political matters.) For instance, attributes only applicable to individuals are transferred to groups, attributes such as "conscience, reason, knowledge, integrity, fidelity, understanding, judgment, and other virtues." Along with this comes the belief that "wisdom can be derived by pooling the conclusions of a sufficient number of persons, even though no one of them has applied his faculties to the problems in question." Belief in the wisdom of the majority is held as a matter of "blind faith."

Read thought that the willingness to delegate moral responsibility to committees, a literal absurdity, is a perversion of the otherwise invaluable division of labor. It is not like delegating shoemaking. In keeping with his characteristic ethic, he would not say what we should think about this matter, but only what *he* thought and did about it: he would take "no part in any association whatever which takes actions implicating me for which I am not ready and willing to accept personal responsibility." For him, integrity demands nothing less.

Read's point is critical. When someone says, "The government ought to provide more student loans" or "I wish the administration would build more homeless shelters"

or "When will Congress pass that subsidy to business?" we are hearing an escape from responsibility. The person who typically says such things would never consider personally employing violence to force his neighbors or even strangers to provide loans, build shelters, or subsidize businessmen. Yet he will earnestly and with a clear conscience join an association in order to have it urge an abstraction (government) to achieve hoped-for ends. You would never know from his statements that, first, abstractions can't act and, second, that concrete innocent taxpayers will have to be dispossessed of their money before those ends can be realized.

Euphemism of course plays a leading role in the flight from responsibility. Open a newspaper any day and you will find examples. The day I wrote this column a physician at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, Robert E. Wittes, decried in a newspaper column the high price of new cancer drugs. The drug companies "are effectively daring the government to impose price controls," he wrote. "This the government must do if the drug industry fails to come to its senses quickly."

The term "price controls" is unusually blunt, but it is still a euphemism. People, not prices, would be controlled. The vogue phrase is "access to affordable prescription drugs." How are we to translate this? "Government" is a collection of individuals playing a variety of roles, all involving the legal use of violence. Medicines are provided by business people, scientists, and others. What is being said, then, is that some people ought to tell other people to whom they must sell their medicines and on what terms, and if the people in the second group refuse to comply, the people in the first should respond with violence.

People have become so habituated to metaphors and euphemisms that they no longer realize what they are saying. They have a strong interest in *not* knowing. In the appropriate context, it behooves the advocate of liberty to translate such statements into a more proper idiom, namely, the idiom of freedom and power. He shouldn't expect gratitude. □