

PROBABLY THE WISEST MAN I'VE EVER MET

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Once in a while I encounter people that I find especially interesting, although, living in Sweden, occasions like these seem conspicuously rare. I'll nevertheless tell you about a man that probably was one of the wisest I've ever met in person.

Wise man say...

I've only recently finished my Ph.D. My home university, the University of Uppsala, is the oldest in this corner of the world, founded in 1477, and has harbored great scientists like botanist Carl Linnaeus, astronomer Anders Celsius and numerous Nobel Prize laureates. But I also have experience from a short stay at the prestigious University of Oxford, UK, and from a one-year stay at the excellent University of Sydney, Australia. I suppose the reader will find this to be of minor interest, but the point I want to illustrate is that it wasn't at either of these famous universities that I met this person. After having studied at what generally is regarded to be three world-class universities, I met this wisest of men outside of these institutions. He must be a truly extraordinary man, mustn't he? Who was he? What made him so extraordinary?

To be fair to him, I must admit that our encounter was very brief and that I haven't seen him since. I met him by coincidence while having a seat at a table where he was sitting with what turned out to be some other Swedes. This made it natural to join their discussion, at least partly. The topic they were discussing was the question of the relation between the English and the Irish and particularly the fact that the English sent thousands of Irishmen to Australia as convicts of various more or less phony crimes in the 19th century. This matter is especially intricate in Australia because it also has a bearing on the issue of the relation between people of aboriginal origins and the present Australian government. The issue under consideration is whether, on principle, Australians should make reparations to their fellow countrymen of Irish, aboriginal or whatever origins, for misdeeds committed by the government in the past. This question appears to be relevant also in New Zealand and North America.

Responsibility 101

This topic is good business for university professors and other great thinkers as they receive public grants to produce and sell their books on the subject. Researcher work on this topic also at my home university and at Oxford, I'm sure. They have a real hard time making up their mind and they seem to be unable to come up with a reasonable and consistent answer. But this whole situation resembles a case where the perpetrator investigates himself, and also acts as the judge, doesn't it?

However, our man had thought about this and I believe he had reached the only plausible answer I've found so far. He hadn't yet written a book or published any articles on the subject and he had financed his thinking himself. He was truly independent, as compared to the government-funded work, and perhaps of a kind all too rare. The content of his answer was the following:

No person should be held responsible for misdeeds committed by others.

From this great principle follows that present-day Australians can't be held responsible for acts committed by others, acts that were committed before the person even was born. Thus, our man laid no claims towards others for any misdeeds committed against his ancestors, because the misdeeds weren't committed against him. But even more important to this matter is that our man laid no claims towards others for any misdeeds committed against his ancestors, simply because the perpetrators of these crimes have long been dead. If he was to lay claims against the present-day government, even the British government, that would be like holding the daughter of a murderer accountable for the murder committed by her father. No Australian today is responsible for what happened one hundred or two hundred years ago – it's as simple as that.

But what does the answer of our wise man tell us about the issue of whether people who live today should be compensated for misdeeds committed to them by the government? This is an intricate question as well. The principle is that no person living today could be held responsible for misdeeds committed by others. It appears that most of the great thinkers at our top universities worldwide answer this question simply by abandoning the principle of our wise man. Consequently, people are held responsible for crimes they haven't committed – and taxpayers are forced to pay for misdeeds committed by others. This must clearly be the wrong way to go, because it would be nothing but yet another misdeed committed by the government. I can't imagine a more terrible state of society than that which would follow a total and consistent abandonment of the principle under question. There must be another answer.

I remember our wise man didn't spell this out, but I'm sure he would have found the following answer, because he obviously was a man of principles: to avoid any future occurrence of cases where the government commits misdeeds against individual citizens and where the government is going to act as its own investigator and judge, the powers of the government must be strictly limited. There simply is no greater threat to peace and security than the unlimited powers of the government.

Think rightly

If we want to make sure that the government isn't able to commit misdeeds towards any persons in the future, government responsibility has to be limited to protecting the individual against force initiated by others than the government itself. If the government could secure that nobody initiated force against another, and was itself limited to do this and only this, each and every person could live a free, peaceful and secure life, irrespective of their origins. Any misdeeds would be dealt with according to the principle in question, i.e. that a person should be held responsible for misdeeds he or she has committed. That is, not to be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character, as in the famous dream of a famous man. Furthermore, if, I say if, this principle was to regain importance, I'm sure there would be millions

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of people who would help out the victims of any government misdeeds. I know I would, if for no other reason than that it would certainly be worth plenty to know that I wouldn't be held accountable for misdeeds I haven't committed.

One thing I've learnt from my years at these world-class universities is the following: you don't become wise by attending a university per se, but by doing your own thinking. The much-besmirched motto of my home university is "To think freely is great, but to think rightly is greater." The smearing insinuates that it's important to think freely, but that it doesn't matter if it's right or wrong – this is the essence of what today is known as academic freedom. But regardless of the smearing, there is no doubt that we all have to try to get it right, and in order to get it right, one has to be able to think freely.

But where did I meet this extraordinary man? Who was he? Well, I met him at a gelateria on Bondi Beach, Sydney. He was sitting at a table with those other Swedes, there were some free seats at the end of the table, and I sat down. The Swedes tried to appear clever by repeating things they'd heard other people say and told the man that it was awful that the British sent so many Irishmen to Australia, and that he as an Australian of Irish origin should feel anger etc., especially towards the British. Our man, who was somewhat intoxicated at the time, answered something like this: Oh, I don't give a sh-t about what happened hundreds of years ago. No bloody Pommie [the Aussie word for the British] has ever done anything to me. Get a life!

Our wise man had no tenure at a top university; he wasn't paid by the government to think about this; he had no fancy office or a secretary. Our wise man had never attended a university, I'm sure. But he had principles. And he got it right. I don't recall his name, but I remember he was a fireman at Bondi. I salute him and his intellect. He is probably the wisest man I've ever met.