

# interpretation

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## Book Review

*The Truth of Freedom: an Essay on Mankind.* By John M. Anderson. (University Park, Pa.: The Dialogue Press, 1979. \$3.55 ppd.)

STEVEN GANS

John M. Anderson in his monograph *The Truth of Freedom: an Essay on Mankind* sets out to provoke us to rethink with him the origin, meaning and purpose of the human political enterprise. He suggests that by speaking freely on what ultimately concerns us, which he takes to be the truth of freedom, we move on a revolutionary path toward the fulfillment of our humanity.

In the preface of his work Anderson compares himself to Socrates; like Socrates he stands outside practical political life, he addresses his fellows in essential language, he expects to be misunderstood and is prepared for the consequences. He too speaks indirectly and ironically through questioning and dialogue. Anderson's opening words in the foreword of his essay recall the first moments of *The Republic* where the stage is set for the introduction of the fundamental problematic of political philosophizing, that is, what good are arguments (Socrates) if force (Polemarchus) won't listen? Anderson puts the question forward in the subheading of his opening chapter, "Free Speech—to what end?" In answer to this question Anderson argues that political authority is founded on existential natural law. Men are free speakers; beings engaged in open relatedness with one another. Curtailment of man's potential for free speech is a violation of the human essence. On the grounds of this fundamental, free speech, Anderson rejects all political speech that is in the service of force or violence. Violent or rebellious speech is not genuine speaking. All violent modes of speech are self-contradictory, they cancel themselves out since no one can listen or speak in an atmosphere of terror and intimidation. Violence cannot support free speaking, the call from and to each of us for a free and open response, the call that we speak the truth.

The body of Anderson's work traces how free speech tends to be curtailed by violence in the form of the quest for unlimited might. His analysis shows how language falls under the spell of social control and becomes eclipsed in its potency to speak truly. This negative phase of his work is intended as a bridge toward a more radical politics founded on free and true speech. Here a warning is in order. It would be wrong to regard Anderson's work as yet another poetical utopian dream. In fact Anderson is expressly against utopian thought.

Anderson returns to the guiding metaphor in Plato's *Republic*, the cave, and suggests that it is an ironic clue which reveals Plato's/Socrates's deep distrust of utopian visionaries. For Anderson the single most important factor in the dissolution of community life in the Greek city state is the introduction of mining, which supports the shift from agrarian to mercantile economy. Ander-

son argues that collective production of might is a response to the temptation to see might and power as the condition or even the purpose of freedom.

In classical Greece men found themselves caught in a basic conflict of values, between traditional life which emphasized the development of human virtue on the one hand and on the other the appeal of the future with its promise of unlimited acquisition of goods and might. The visionary dared break with the past in the belief that a new world would be built, which would fulfil men's desires.

But the dream quickly turns into a nightmare. Production becomes separated from consumption, owners from workers, men from one another. Tradition and virtue are overthrown and men become homeless, without ties or bonds to land, family or the Gods.

Anderson remarks, "the designers of utopia have shown us not the reality of freedom, but only the necessity of their daring" (p. 13). The decision to acquire wealth enslaves men to the means to acquire it. Those who pursue might must set aside the past and present, sacrifice their integral harmony with the world and produce a rational economy deploying their activities in a logistically and technically efficient manner. As a consequence of this transformation of orientation, man's nature is transformed. Man measures what is useful and productive but forgets what these "goods" mean to him. Men forget what they mean to one another and are no longer able to genuinely speak, care or love. The market place organized strictly for profit develops. The wealthy are expected to pay for the cost of arousing their desire for the goods and services they consume. The channel for the expression of freedom collapses into the absurdity of conspicuous consumption of extravagant and useless products.

To summarize Anderson's detailed exposition, the paradox of the utopian vision is that it cannot give an account of how its artificial unity can be maintained. With the collapse of unity into warring factions, there is a collapse of the utopian pretension. Even the notion of a continual social revolution for more equitable distribution of wealth raises the issue of how this revolution can be achieved peacefully. Will people reject current bonds and allegiances in the hope of achieving a so-called free humanity and a new man in the future? The initial problem facing the founders and planners of a utopia is that they must break the ties of children with their families so as to create a collective with a new allegiance. Enforced homelessness, perpetuated by the dissolution of family, promiscuity, and state child-rearing and education is to redirect allegiance toward a future new free humanity. But how is this break with history to be achieved? The planner-founders must persuade a nucleus of men and women to form a collective of free individuals. The paradox of being brainwashed to freedom is painfully obvious, yet this is the inescapable lie at the core of every utopia. How, Anderson asks, can a lie serve as the crucial founding act determining the movement of history toward the truth of freedom?

In Part II of his work Anderson poses the question of the grounds for

political obligation in terms of an analysis of sovereignty. Anderson begins his analysis with a reappraisal of the basic family structure. Is the family an insufficient good, as utopian thinking suggests, or is the family a “good enough” basis to provide the framework on which to build a politics of free speaking? What is the nature of the basic human bond between husband and wife? In the ancient world the bond was not based on affection, as today, but on spiritual links to the ancestral line. Marriage bridged the unknown between one family/ancestral line and another. The patriarch-sovereign welcomed a stranger, to renew the family line. Through marriages of renewal political order developed. Authority vested in the patriarch-sovereign was derived from the charismatic potency of his roots in the tradition. Tyrants on the other hand gained power by breaking with the past in the name of their vision of the future. Sovereignty requires the unification of the patriarchal and tyrannical functions of leadership.

The sovereign must unify the past, our common basis for relating, with our future, where our relations with others will be consummated. Anderson implies sovereignty is not legitimated on any of the classical philosophic grounds, for example, by a consent theory (Socrates), a contract theory (Hobbes), a general will theory (Rousseau), a justice theory (Locke—natural rights) or a common good theory (Mill). Rather, the real test of legitimacy is the extent to which the sovereign succeeds in unifying past with future so that men may achieve lasting bonds with their fellow men.

On what grounds do we assess according to Anderson that a sovereign is not adequate to the task so that we are justified in our opposition to a particular political regime? For Anderson democratic free speech is the absolute *sine qua non* for relating, that is, for establishing and maintaining the human bond. Control of speech is out of bounds in principle. Nevertheless, the pure application of this rule may result in political chaos, as instanced in the Weimar Republic of Germany. All spoke with equal justification to speak for all and the result was a babble in which the many were drowned by innumerable vocal and violent groups and factions. How a regime evaluates and recognizes the claims of groups to speak for the many is the question every democratic regime must resolve in order to exist and survive. The locus of ultimate sovereignty (legitimacy) can never be fixed once and for all, “it floats in the stream of political action” (p. 54). The sovereign—those who speak for the many—must never be finally fixed and determined since only the regime that is open to free discourse achieves legitimate sovereignty.

In the third and concluding section of his work, titled “The Polity,” Anderson addresses himself to the question of the place of the individual’s transpolitical or philosophic commitment in society. Men are free but paradoxically they use their freedom to identify with others. They become prey to *Das Mann* (in Heidegger’s language), to a false self system.

Should a man instead commit himself to that which is beyond man, to the

ultimate, in order to realize his humanity? Should he like Socrates prepare to “disappear from our midst”? (p. 58). Anderson states that the singleminded man resolves the paradox of freedom in contradiction, in transcendence. But in doing so he denies the power of the call of other men, the call to stand in freedom with them. So Anderson enjoins us not to be singleminded, “when sacrifice supports not merely the act of the aspiring individual disappearing from our midst towards the ultimate, but is a gift to others by each who gives up; it supports the mutual recognition of each other as different” (p. 59). This gift develops a bond and this bond of mutual recognition opens us to the potential for free collective action. By a series of what Anderson calls ‘political actions’ we can tie together past, present and future, and become a people. As such we are on a path toward what lies beyond the ultimate, and the articulation of its richness in our midst. The path of paths, the sequence of public actions built in diverse ways by diverse groups tending towards the same direction enables the ultimate, the truth of freedom to be realized in our social and political reality. The work of attaining to such public action is revolutionary and unending. It is man’s imitation of free becoming, which is the truth of freedom. “Along this path our creative freedom is embedded with integrity in the free becoming of the ultimate, and this path—the work of revolution—becomes man’s truth and his dwelling in what lies beyond him” (p. 71–72).

John Anderson has in broad strokes taken up the central issues of political philosophy and clarified some of the basic terms of political philosophic discourse, for example, might, freedom, utopia, sovereignty, the state and democracy. He has done this within the context of a Heideggerian approach to Being. He has woven a complex dialectical argument giving grounds for the assessment of a wide array of prototypical political belief systems as well as the political philosophic orientation itself.

How well will Anderson’s theoretical position translate to *praxis*, in universities, hospitals, industries and political institutions? Will his readers “revolt and break the existing chains of political order for freedom” as he counsels? Or is there a contradiction in Anderson authorizing us to rebel in order to seize our own authority to speak the truth of our freedom?

The primary contribution of Anderson’s work is to counter the criticism that Heidegger’s philosophy of Being amounts to an ontological imperialism. If we are to subject ourselves to the call of Being and history as Heidegger seems to advocate, does this in certain circumstances amount to underwriting fascism? This charge gained credibility as a result of Heidegger’s apparent acquiescence to the Nazi regime in the early 1930s. Anderson in defense of Heidegger’s line of thought makes explicit that a faithful reading of Heidegger results in a politics of *Seinlassen*. The ultimate task of this politics is to release the potential of all human beings for their *mitsein*, their potential for free expression and open association within a democratic political order of mutual recognition, respect and community.

To what extent Anderson's call for the overthrow of the violence of social control in conventional political life will find a resonance and spark a response to dialogue, or to what extent this call will be ignored and seen as the delusional system of an ivory-tower intellectual, remains to be seen.