
Afterword: Last Reflections

What I Have Done and Why

So much of what erudite people tell us deals with our motives. Why did Enron executives mess up what seemed like a savvy big business? Why did bin Laden direct terrorists to the World Trade Center and the Pentagon? Why did Lincoln suspend the principles of habeas corpus?

Reference to some motive or drive that leads people to do what they do is then made as an answer to these questions. As if it were so easy.

In fact, though, we do things for many reasons; our motives are rarely just this or that but usually a collage. And if a piece of that collage were missing, we could have done something entirely different.

For me, the explanation of how I've led my life probably lies in a broad range of facts, some having to do with my personality or temperament, some with my circumstances, some with my understanding of what matters most, some with what I've learned from others, and most of it with some combination of all these and others. Having been born in a country under the heavy influence of the Nazis, which then got taken over by Communists, and then managing to escape only to land in the home of a father with unambiguous anti-Semitic and fascist convictions—all the while being a ferocious reader of novels from Hungary, Germany, and America—I suppose all these factors in my past made a difference. Yet, I am also convinced that I brought to the

table a particular, idiosyncratic way of making these factors matter in my life.

Once my late friend and mentor Ernest van den Haag, who among other things was a psychoanalyst, told me that I could probably murder someone and get off by pleading insanity, given my history, especially with my rather brutal upbringing. My mother, though often sweet, was a fanatical athlete whose method of discipline consisted mainly of slapping me around and using a horsewhip to beat on my thighs so when I'd go to school wearing shorts, I'd be picked on and laughed at. My father, in whose care fortunately I spent only a few years, was far worse. Nightly beatings left me utterly bewildered; I was baffled as to what was going on, why this torrent of anger and violence was in my life.

No, I wasn't some angel kid, of course. I had some of the discipline coming but rarely with the ferocity and anger my mother and later my father showed toward me. (Yet, consider their circumstances — it strikes me that they, especially my mother, had some excuses for their misconduct.) Still, none of that stopped me from living a kid's life, as well. My fondness for girls started early, my unceasing reading of fiction nearly at the same time, and I also did all the playful things to be expected from a child anywhere. When I came to America, I found myself confused, alone, and in need of some orientation, which is why, shortly after I ran away from home on my eighteenth birthday, it seemed not only prudent but wise to join the U.S. Air Force, where I got to think things through in relative leisure. In particular, I started to read philosophy while riding the base bus to and from work, even while standing at my post as an air policeman. I also discovered Ayn Rand and the wonders of travel — indirectly, through what I learned from some officer friends in the little theater group I helped found — and why it probably would

be better to go to college than to take a job with the Pennsylvania highway patrol, a plan of action I at first conceived for myself.

Once I discovered that learning was exciting and rewarding, I also found my past to be a source of interest. I found out that an important question for everyone concerns what kind of community they should foster around themselves. Having experienced communism and elements of fascism, and having known implicitly and tacitly at first, and by direct experience later, that the promise of freedom is much better than these, I wanted to explore whether I was right about this or was just telling myself a story to rationalize having left Hungary. So, of all the subjects I explored in my earlier night school and later full-time college courses, philosophy popped up as the right one for me to tackle. I just really wanted to know what's right and why. There seemed to be no subject other than philosophy that promised to shed light on that matter in comparable depth.

But then I also had a yen for expressing my own hunches, convictions, questions, worries, and judgments, those I garnered from my philosophical and related readings and conversations with friends. And some were even original, though I cannot recall now which. So, very early on, even before going to college, I began writing letters to the editor, partly as a way to put into practice my hard-earned yet wobbly knowledge of English, partly to try to influence people, especially in places of power, to consider certain ideas more seriously than they seemed to want to.

From letter writing I went on to short essays, mostly for my school paper and then for the *Freeman* (now called *Ideas on Liberty*), ending up by helping to found a more serious version of an already budding magazine, *Reason*. Indeed, back in graduate school I had already been criticized by

some of my professors—as I mentioned in the preface to this book—for being a bit quick with voicing my views; why didn't I act more humbly, more tentatively, as a good analytic philosopher should? (That was a joke—most analytic philosophers I knew were nothing if not smug and arrogant!) And when I challenged a local TV station about broadcasting ads for savings bonds, in order to show the injustice of banning cigarette ads because they were controversial, I was dismissed as just having some kind of compulsion to say something on a host of topics. Well, but was it a compulsion or rather a realization that there should be more good sense going around about public affairs? I thought the latter—I never felt as if I couldn't put aside my pen because I just had to write, no. I wanted to write—but I also wanted to do a lot else and did, partly to learn how to write and talk well enough to earn an audience. And this took time.

Of course many times I was told I might be too taken with my own ideas—why didn't I just listen more? Well, I did and do a lot of listening—reading, taking part in discussions, reflecting, revising, and so forth. But who of those who give expression to their ideas, questions, puzzles, criticisms, and wonder prizes humility above all? I gather all who chime in, whatever the content of their thought, take it that doing so matters and is needed for reaching decisions about how we should live, how our communities should be shaped. The issue isn't, I thought, remaining silent or speaking up but whether one speaks up thoughtfully, carefully, with good purpose.

My faults are probably many, but perhaps—contrary to some suggestions—they do not include my being a bit too prolific, considering what I choose to write on, mainly the vitality of human freedom and its proper institutional pro-

tection. This choice comes not from false pride but from a sense of what I can only consider valid urgency. Even in the midst of crisis, as I am doing the needed damage control—for instance, dealing with one of my children’s reckless experiments with drugs or doomed romance, an auto accident, or a financial meltdown—I try to keep half an eye, at least, on the fate of liberty and on whatever threatens to take it from us. The same with times when I might lie back to enjoy a moment of triumph, the euphoria of doing well at something—I find the point about the price of liberty being eternal vigilance nearly impossible to lay aside.

For better or worse, I am convinced that too little of the kind of thinking I have come to see as sensible manages to get on the agenda of prominent forums, so I try very hard to get it there, period. And I’ll continue to do this, even if the volume may strike some as too great. That’s because if my part in the continuing conversation about the best way for people to live together helps even a little to make the world a more thoughtful and better place—helps encourage us to be more fully human and civilized—then maybe it is not too presumptuous to think that my contribution has been of value—both to me and to those I love. Which is gratifying and certainly helps make this part-time pundit’s life worth living!

Try it yourself and see!