

## **“Mistakes were made” – Ben Oldfield**

The Greek debt crisis; the U.S Democratic Party’s fundraising scandal of 1997; the Iraq war; the death of 25-year-old black man, Freddie Gray, shortly after being arrested in Baltimore earlier this year: all of these are examples of man-made calamities. Yet besides this, what else do they all have in common?

The clue is in the very title of this essay: they have all been summed up, by one official or another, using the three simple words, “mistakes were made”. It is no coincidence that this exact phrase has a habit of popping up in times of tragedy, and even less so that it is almost unfailingly accompanied by the stench of corruption. For those four syllables constitute a cunning rhetorical device; they allow a person to acknowledge wrongdoing at the same time as avoiding the ascription of direct responsibility to any one individual or group. This linguistic construct has been widely exploited for so long that some have come to refer to it as a tense of its own: the past exonerative.<sup>i</sup>

We, the people, by now acquainted with such tricks, are less and less convinced by this non-apology with each new utterance of it. When something goes wrong with disastrous consequences, one of the first things we want to know is who is responsible. Especially for those directly afflicted, being kept in the dark as to the cause of their suffering can be the source of yet more emotional anguish.

So, while we can all agree that, in such tragedies, mistakes were indeed made, what raises eyebrows about the phrase in question is its lack of subject. But perhaps, though those who refuse to accept the *blame* (blame here referring to the reactive attitude of the public) are generally not justified in doing so, it could, in some sense, be justifiable to obfuscate the *responsibility* (responsibility being seen as a causal concept) for such human tragedies. As I will elaborate: in its cowardly evasion, the phrase, “mistakes were made”, just might embody a profound truth.

Derived from the Old Norse, “mistaka”, meaning “to take in error”, and probably influenced similarly by the Old French, “mesprendre”, which carries more or less the same meaning, it seems that the essence of the word “mistake” is some notion of misunderstanding or misconception. The human race has been making “mistakes” of this sort since the beginning of civilisation. Whether it be the misconception, formed upon discovering populations of different lands and cultures, that certain groups of humans are, by essence, superior or inferior to others (which is, very loosely, a definition of racism), or the way that, somewhere along the line, we came to take power and wealth in error as the primary goals of human existence, it seems that all the human corruption and injustice that so often elicits the excuse, “mistakes were made”, can be shown to be but a continuation of those early mistakes that have ailed the human race for so long.

Yet you may question at this point why, if we are able to identify and acknowledge these time-old mistakes, we are still feeling their effects. It is important to understand that mistakes have far more than just a fleeting influence. It may be a useful exercise here to consider a mathematician who makes an error in the first stages of a calculation. It is not just those calculations that become incorrect as a result, but all of the subsequent calculations suffer, too. If you are working with misconceived numbers from the start, then you have no hope of ever reaching the correct answer in the end.

And so it goes for mathematical calculations and human civilisation alike. This is the tricky thing about mistakes; they leave their mark on every area of life. For, as much as we love to extol the genius and progress of the human race, we are not all that good at

exercising our critical faculties in everyday life. Hence, we have a tendency to accept too readily the attitudes we inherit from our ancestors and, while we might be able to recognise and refute age-old misconceptions in an abstract sense, we fail to appreciate fully their influence on the way we think and live. It's not surprising that, while most people would claim not to be racist, tests designed to observe subconscious racial attitudes show that around 70% of white westerners display bias in favour of people of their own race.<sup>ii</sup> As for power and material wealth, they both find their way to the centre of our day-to-day discourse; we seem to use the term "successful" almost synonymously with "wealthy and powerful" when describing somebody. By no means do I mean to reduce all of our problems to these two specific attitudes, but they are telling examples.

It is doubtful that the police officers involved in the death of Freddie Gray were born with an innate racial prejudice that would lead them to act in the way they did; nor does it sound plausible that the US Democrats involved in the fundraising scandal had been grasping at power and wealth from their cots. Rather, these attitudes must have come from external influences. Be the sources parents, teachers, the media or any other bodies who influence young minds, these misconceptions can all be traced back through the generations.

In fact, it is clear that the worst of our attitudes must be born not of nature but nurture if we observe the glaring double standards we apply in criticising other cultures. Earlier this year saw social media uproar over the Yulin Dog Meat Festival in China, condemning its cruelty and barbarism. Yet, one wonders how many of those expressing their disgust have ever questioned the meat they eat here in the UK, which is often produced by similarly barbaric means. It seems we are quick enough to pick up on depravities that are alien to us, yet we fail to detect those of our own.

As Philip Larkin wrote in his 1971 poem, *This Be The Verse*:

"Man hands on misery to man.  
It deepens like a coastal shelf.  
Get out as early as you can,  
And don't have any kids yourself."

Yet I am unsure that such a wholly pessimistic view should be gleaned from all of this. While a lecture in determinism may do little to assuage the ills of those dealing with tragedy as a result of others' mistakes, the idea is of great philosophical and practical importance – recognising the origin of our mistakes is the first step towards resolving them. Man may hand on misery to man, but we don't have to accept this misery. The fact that we are, as I have just remarked, so keenly aware of injustices in other cultures is, itself, a glimmer of hope, a testament to the potential of our moral faculties. When we harness this scrutiny and turn it in on our own behaviour and thoughts, real progress begins to take place.

This self-scrutiny is achieved through debate; and that does not mean solely the kind that takes place in the House of Commons or the Oxford Union, but the kind that takes place in every classroom, every newspaper, the inner dialogue that takes place inside each of our own minds. Only the truth can withstand pure and unbiased reason, and only prejudice and illusion prevent us from discovering it. By debating, both privately and publicly, the ideas we encounter, we can eventually recognise and correct our own mistakes and those of others. But progress should not be taken for granted. Like our perplexed mathematician and his calculations, we must be constantly examining our thoughts and practices for the mark of mistake.

It is thus that those evasive politicians and other public figures may have hit unwittingly upon a very human truth: mistakes were made. Mistakes are always being made, but there is no single agent to whom we can ascribe responsibility for them. Made by humankind since the dawn of civilisation, the onus is on every one of us to detect and correct every last trace of them. This is no small feat, and one might spend a lifetime fighting just the smallest fraction of the world's injustice, but with each small fraction this world becomes a better place.

There is a great deal of wisdom in St Hilda's College's motto, "non frustra vixi" – for those not versed in 2000-year-old languages, that translates as "I lived not in vain" – for if there is one thing we should hold dear, whatever path we take, it is the conviction that one day, we will make an impact, be it great or small, on the residual injustice of ancient mistakes; that we shall not live in vain.

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<sup>i</sup> Broder, J.M. (2007) *Familiar Fallback for Officials: 'Mistakes Were Made'*; The New York Times:  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/14/washington/14mistakes.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/14/washington/14mistakes.html?_r=0)

<sup>ii</sup> Gjersoe, N. (2015) *How can we fix unconscious racism?*; The Guardian:  
<http://www.theguardian.com/science/head-quarters/2015/jul/08/how-can-we-fix-unconscious-racism>