

# The burden of freedom: The doctrine of subject in Thomas Carlyle's works

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Although Thomas Carlyle's contemporaries were Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill, the pillars of the classical positivism, he was anxious to found the ontological status of the subject. Kant showed that the subject is an epistemological institution that plays its part as a way to the domain of pure metaphysics; Hegel, a radical Kantian, subdued the whole course of logic, nature and history to self-realization of the Absolute Spirit. In Carlyle's work we find an interesting method: he tends to reveal a historical person ("a hero") as a subject of history and interprets him as the one subdued to Providence, or Nature. On this basis he endows the hero with the status of a means of Nature. Although this view represents a sound approach to creating a qualitative or metaphysical foundation of the description of a human being rather than the quantitative approach of sciences and the positivism, it inevitably brings about the paradox of "the weak and the powerful"; in the paper it is discussed as the *Carlyle's paradox*. It is also significant that Carlyle derives his philosophical inspiration in the tradition of German idealism. J. G. Fichte's doctrine of the destination of Man is very indicative in this respect. As a result, Carlyle's doctrine of hero-worship is considered by him as a doctrine of freedom: to be free means accepting the burden of Providence and realizing it as a certain life project.

*Keywords:* Thomas Carlyle, conservatism, hero-worship, doctrine of freedom, laissez-faire liberalism, Carlyle's paradox.

## Introduction

Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), being one of the most influential and prolific authors of the Victorian age both in Great Britain and Europe, should be named among those who created conservative agenda of the present time. Regarded as a prophet by his contemporaries, he became misunderstood and labelled as a *pre-step to Hitler* by the readers of the following generations. However, Carlyle's works and thought should be revised from the perspective of the recent cultural and anthropological challenges.

Avoiding any pompousness or pathetic expression, we still consider the very figure of Carlyle to be symbolical in terms of his doctrine of a hero-worship. This doctrine, to our mind, is one of the key steps to a thorough examination of the concept of subject in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which prepared further rise of philosophical anthropology as an element of the conservative doctrine in the 1920s. At the same time, we are not keen on the scheme of "causes and effects", and it is not our aim to connect Carlyle's hero-worship with the projects of the German thinkers of the beginning of the twentieth century; rather, we intend

to demonstrate (though briefly, given the format of the journal paper) some explications from his doctrine that allowed to reinforce the concept of subject, and establish an opposing, still fruitful, view to the conception of men's equality and freedom.

The topicality of such a research becomes obvious in light of the tradition which could be called the one of misunderstanding. Indeed, Carlyle's thought has encountered misinterpretations and false accusations of pseudo-nationalistic and even fascist tendencies from the contemporaries and up to present-day critics. We argue that Carlyle's position was a thoroughly considered conviction based upon his traditionalistic views; thus, it was clear for him that no other order apart from the *divine* one (or *natural* which, from his point of view, is the same), and any Liberal *laissez-faire* movements that insisted on realization of any *self-evident and unalienable* rights are acceptable and true, as they do not rest on the concept of labour. Unless one tries to do his best, he cannot reach any success — this banality properly considered becomes an ontological basis for the main Law of Nature in Carlyle's philosophy, and this is the essential prism through which his ideas of hero-worship could only be realized correctly.

These two points — the essence of the hero as the subject and the possibility for all men to become free — will be considered in the present paper in the corresponding parts. Besides that, there is an additional part dedicated to what we call the *Carlyle's paradox*. By examining this problem, we will reveal how the Scottish thinker understood the very nature of liberty, and this argument will bring us closer to the realization of his alternative project of freedom. At the end of the paper, we will summarize the arguments and present an additional *Postscript*, where some information of the reception of Carlyle's works in Russia will be given.

## Hero as the Subject and His Characteristics<sup>1</sup>

It is well-known that by the hero Thomas Carlyle meant the subject of history as a certain living place of all men. One may discern the following four features of the heroic persons as the Scottish thinker established the concept.

Firstly, hero is *sincere*, or *self-subsistent*, and he feels anxious to pay the whole price to the world of work, and wisely established world and the wisdom of life are reflected in his own toil. In other words, to be sincere means to realize the true face of the universe, and the one who possesses it cannot reconcile with the “other men's dead formulas, hearsays and untruths” [2, p. 145]: “<...> every worker, in all spheres, is a worker not on semblance but on substance; every work issues in a result: the general sum of such work is great; for all of it, as genuine, tends towards one goal; all of it is additive, none of it is subtractive. There is true union, true kingship, loyalty, all true and blessed things, so far as the poor Earth can produce blessedness for men” [2, p.144—145]. One should bear in mind that a plain, ordinary person can be sincere as well; and the very fact of sincerity does not make a hero out of man. This is an important premise for the realization of how a non-hero could get closer to the ideal of history and nature.

Secondly, the hero is *moral* because he is able to empathize with another person and is ready to hear them and understand. In its very sense, morality compels the person to discern a human being in another one, and this is hard work. That is why, the one who

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<sup>1</sup> In this part we use some ideas from another paper of ours, vide: [1].

is moral, is powerful and strong. It is quite illustrative that the opposite of morality is, to Carlyle, formalism (or, as the author spells it, *Formulism*): “No more immoral act can be done by a human creature; for it is the beginning of all immorality, or rather it is the impossibility henceforth of any morality whatsoever; the innermost moral soul is paralyzed thereby, cast into fatal magnetic sleep! Men are no longer sincere men. I do not wonder that the earnest man denounces this, brands it, prosecutes it with inextinguishable aversion. He and it, all good and it, are at death-feud. Blamable Idolatry is Cant, and even that one may call Sincere-Cant” [2, p. 140–141]. That is, the age of hypocrisy and bigotry appears to be an immoral age; and the mentioned features become the Idols of the century demanding either to rule or to be dismissed by a true-believer. We would like to point out *en passant* that it is in German culture that Carlyle finds the examples of healthy and morally advanced poets and priests, believers — those whose “faith is the doctrine they have to teach us, the sense which, under every noble and graceful form, it is their endeavor to set forth” [3, p. 65]. Moreover, it was Max Scheler, who in 1915 published his *Der Genius des Krieges und der Deutsche Kriege* (tr.: *The Genius of War and The German War*), in which he developed the analysis of cant as a typically English feature. However, this should be left in the present paper only as a remark.

Thirdly, the hero is *original*, that is, he manages to avoid the slavery of hearsays and rumors; he is the one who obtains his own image in work, hence, the one who is free in his work. However, by “freedom” Carlyle means quite a specific thing, namely, such a quality which makes a person a devoted and selfless worker under the command of Providence. Let us notice that heroic originality is deeply rooted in the “religious spirit”, or the feeling of some universal law. Here are the Carlyle’s words: “<...> this is yet the only true morality known. A man is right and invincible, virtuous and on the road towards sure conquest, precisely while he joins himself to the great deep Law of the World, in spite of all superficial laws, temporary appearances, profit-and-loss calculations; he is victorious while he cooperates with that great central Law, not victorious otherwise; — and surely his first chance of cooperating with it, or getting into the course of it, is to know with his whole soul that it is; that it is good, and alone good!” [2, p. 65] Such characteristics Carlyle attributed to Muhammed and Islam, however, one may consider this to be the echo of a classical principle of Greek philosophy as it was inscribed in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: a famous dictum “know thyself” (γνώθι σεαυτόν) alongside with a mysterious “E” which Plutarch considered to be the response to deity and, thus, acknowledgement of its existence<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, the hero *can keep silence* and prefers it to any utterance. Hero is the one who hears the Divine voice, at the same time keeping silence himself; and here is a paradox, for it is such state of things that only makes it possible for him to express himself in history. This muteness, this silence, which he worships and cherishes, turns out to be much more powerful and mighty than any other considerable utterance “from oneself”. A rather interesting explication can be found in the heroic personality of the artist, the poet, who (as, for instance, Dante Alighieri) appears to be just an instrument of Providence: “The *Divina Commedia* is of Dante’s writing; yet in truth it belongs to ten Christian centuries, only the finishing of it is Dante’s. So always. The craftsman there, the smith with that metal of his, with these tools, with these cunning methods, — how little of all he does is prop-

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<sup>2</sup> Vide: [4, p. 203–204], *ibid.* ref. 2.

erly his work! All past inventive men work there with him; — as indeed with all of us, in all things. Dante is the spokesman of the Middle Ages; the Thought they lived by stands here, in everlasting music. These sublime ideas of his, terrible and beautiful, are the fruit of Christian Meditation, of all the good men who had gone before him. Precious they; but also is not he precious? Much, had not he spoken, would have been dumb; not dead, yet living voiceless” [2, p. 112].

Thus, we see that there is a tough relationship between a hero and his age, on the one hand, and the hero and Providence — on the other. And, which is really significant, not everyone who possesses all these features immediately becomes a hero. On the contrary, the one who is the true means of Nature and represents the Law of the Universe, has all these characteristics in his soul. But, anyway, each ordinary person could possess this or that trait of a heroic character within, and this (although not making them worthy of worship) allows them to recognize a hero and worship him, and, consequently, to realize the course of Nature and Providence.

### Carlyle's Paradox

In his essay *Characteristics*, which is widely regarded as a “condensed and telling statement of some of his most fundamental ideas” [5, p. 317], Thomas Carlyle argues for a quite an equivocal position. Briefly speaking, he starts from the idea of the human imperfection that leads all men to the idea of necessity of philosophy and science (he used the examples of anatomy and metaphysics) [5, p. 320]. Hence, the one who starts exploiting the power of their mind perfectly soon finds out that it is possible and even mandatory to reveal all the secrets of the natural order of things and explain everything in terms of objectiveness. Carlyle's respond to that is: “But Nature, it might seem, strives, like a kind mother, to hide from us even this, that she is a mystery <...>. So cunningly does Nature <...> guide man safe on his wondrous path, not more by endowing him with vision, than at the right place with blindness.” [5, p. 321]. Having used certain elements of eloquence, our author concludes his meditation with a meaningful phrase which demands a really thorough examination: “We may now say, that view man's individual Existence under what aspect we will, under the highest spiritual, as under the merely animal aspect, everywhere the grand vital energy, while in its sound state, is an unseen unconscious one; or, in the words of our old Aphorism, ‘the healthy know not of their health, but only the sick’” [5, p. 327].

Such an ambiguous position that we could call *Carlyle's paradox* is perfectly summarized by G. K. Chesterton in his brilliant essay on our author: “It may be said that there is a certain inconsistency between these two justifications of Carlyle's hero-worship: that we cannot at the same time respect a man because he is above us in a definite spiritual order, and because he is in what is popularly called a hole; that we cannot at once reverence Mirabeau because he was strong and because he was weak” [6, p. 18]. Frankly speaking, no one would deliberately agree to worship the man who overwhelms his own abilities and moral creed; on the contrary, this situation of moral perfection could, rather, lead a person to the dead-end of despair and doubts.

But at the same time this paradox appears to be a principle position when we try to consider the case from the perspective of Carlyle himself. We remember that hero is not the one who rules, but the one who is a steering-wheel in the hands of Providence, otherwise, an ideal hero would be Napoleon in whose character the Scottish thinker clearly

saw a hint at “the fatal charlatan-element” that “exists in all of us” [2, p.277–278]. This charlatan-element is self-confidence and self-consciousness, and as sincerity is such a trait that connects a plain, ordinary person to a hero, so self-consciousness connects a potential hero to the worst example of mediocrity — to a Liberal: “Self-consciousness leads to egoism, whereas true awareness of self can remain only mysterious; the final mystery of existence is a fundamental Carlyle principle. Knowledge is a matter of faith and belief; truth is not to be found by analysis but by nonanalytical and unconsciousness means” [7, p.94].

At the background of such a conclusion, one might notice a wider formulation of Carlyle’s *paradox*: to be powerful means to be totally dependent on the fate; to be weak means to be totally dependent on oneself. Various explanations could be introduced here, starting from the Calvinist origin of our author and his father’s rigor and religiousness to any Freudian analysis. Anyway, we find it very notable that in this point Carlyle actually declares and stands for the classical understanding of life and its inner drive, namely, the fate, or τύχη. The latter remains unknown even to the gods, and Oedipus’s story is the best illustration of how a person who was anxious about avoiding a fatal prediction led himself to a deadly trap, from which the only way out was to be resigned to fate and to leave the throne and move away as a blind and ruined man. It deserves a special mention that Sophocles entitled his tragedy Oedipus *Tyrannus*, which emphasizes the false drive of the self-confident hero. According to Carlyle, Napoleon is reflected in Oedipus, and thus should be considered as a representative of a definitely tragic character. Thus, the seed of the Greek concept of fate and predestination found fertile soil in the Protestant creed of the Victorian age and bred a fruitful tree of any kind of anti-egalitarianism.

## What Does It Mean To Be Equal?

It is noteworthy that Carlyle’s usual definition of liberalism is “*Laissez-faire*”, which becomes predominantly associated with the rise of economic and egalitarian worldview. According to Carlyle, liberalism as it was formulated by its founding fathers is nothing more than a domain of figures and calculation: “A good structure of legislation, a proper check upon the executive, a wise arrangement of the judiciary, is all that is wanting for human happiness. The Philosopher of this age is not a Socrates, a Plato, a Plooker, or Taylor, who inculcates on men the necessity and infinite worth of moral goodness, the great truth that our happiness depends on the mind which is within us, and not on the circumstances which are without us; but a Smith, a De Lolme, a Bentham, who chiefly inculcates the reverse of this, — that our happiness depends entirely on external circumstances; nay, that the strength and dignity of the mind within us is itself the creature and consequence of these. Were the laws, the government, in good order, all were well with us; the rest would care for itself!” [8, p.472]. Such an attitude to liberalism as a *doctrine* remains unchanged in all Carlyle’s works. For instance, he calls the doctrine of *laissez-fair* a Mammon-Gospel, and regards it as the worst doctrine that has ever been preached [9, p.178]. This contemporary world of *steam and engines* he thinks to be a domain of numbers, sorrow and anguish, where (in a striking accord with Schopenhauer) mediocrities reign — to put it, a kind of industrial hell instead of labour paradise.

But it does not follow at all that the Scottish philosopher neglected the opportunity for a human being to become free. Moreover, his doctrine of hero-worship primarily meant that a great man is indeed a fruit of nature, he is an evidence of its might and power, and

establishes the natural truth by his activity. Taking into account any historical or social circumstances, one may say that a true hero always represents the powers of Providence, which enduringly stands in the background, and nothing from himself; thus, there is only one way to get to the truth and power, namely, *zurück zum Natur!* — back to Nature! (but as the Scottish prophet, not the Swiss citizen understood the term). That is why it is quite in Carlyle's style to consider the age of liberalism to be the realm of evil powers: "Even in the darkest days of Chartism or Benthamism, the hero is never wholly gone from the earth, though, in elevating this ideal man, Carlyle points to past glory and future bliss. The present age is one of darkness; the future will provide the heroic" [7, p. 101].

As heroes appear only as the reflection of Providence, they are those who not only must be worshipped but are connected with the divine mover of the world history. Only in religion, as Carlyle argues, true equality can be found. A quite illustrative example here is his description of the Muslim faith: "<...> Islam, like any great faith, and insight into the essence of man, is a perfect equalizer of men: the soul of one believer outweighs all earthly kingships; all men, according to Islam too, are equal. Mahomet insists not on propriety of living alms, but on the necessity of it: he marks-down by law how much you are to give, and it is at your peril if you neglect" [2, p. 84].

And here we find a significant consent in Fichte's and Carlyle's points of view. Carlyle was an ardent reader of Fichte; this fact becomes obvious from his digressions into the German thinker's doctrine in several papers. The primary concern of Fichte's thought is his notion of a role that literary men play. This role is closely connected with the search for truth which lies hidden in the world to the great mass of men: "<...> yet, to discern it, to seize it, and live wholly in it, is the condition of all genuine virtue, knowledge, freedom; and the end, therefore, of all spiritual effort in every age. Literary Men are the appointed interpreters of the Divine Idea; a perpetual priesthood, we might say, standing forth, generation after generation, as the dispensers and living types of God's everlasting wisdom, to show it in their writings and actions, in such particular for as their own particular times require it in" [3, p. 56–57]. One of the most striking goals of these literary men, whom Fichte considered to be the ancestors of the wild and illiterate savages tribes [10, p. 88], is to lead the humanity to the universal unity: "It is the destiny of our race to become united into one great body, thoroughly connected in all its parts, and possessed of similar culture. Nature, and even the passions and vices of Man, have from the beginning tended towards this end. A great part of the way towards it is already passed, and we may surely calculate that it will in time be reached" [ibidem]. Carlyle agrees with this purpose completely, emphasizing the role of heroes who are not only literary men, but divinities, prophets, poets and so on.

Thus, to be equal means to carry one's faith throughout the whole of their life and eagerly subdue oneself to those who represent the Natural (that is Providential) law of the Universe. This position could appear to be too rigorous and discriminative; however, it has an important feature: from this perspective the numeral, quantitative dimension of the world ceases to exist, and the transcendent, qualitative dimension emerges. A striking example of this true equation — though, for many liberally oriented people, even more savage — is the story of a famous traveler Mungo Park. It was when his wanderings stuck in the center of Africa, and there was nowhere to expect help from: "Not even in Black Dahomey was it ever, I think, forgotten to the typhus-fever length. Mungo Park, resourceless, had sunk down to die under the Negro Village-Tree, a horrible White object in the

eyes of all. But in the poor Black Woman, and her daughter who stood aghast at him, whose earthly wealth and funded capital consisted of one small calabash of rice, there lived a heart richer than *Laissez-faire*: they, with a royal munificence, boiled their rice for him; they sang all night to him, spinning assiduous on their cotton distaffs, as he lay to sleep: 'Let us pity the poor white man; no mother has he to fetch him milk, no sister to grind him corn!' Thou poor black Noble One, — thou *Lady* too: did not a God make thee too; was there not in thee too something of a God!" [9, p. 204] It is a significant place, for it is an evidence of the principle equality of all who believe, not only the learned. No cant dwells here, but the true and sincere feelings only. In other words, to appear in this village in Black Africa meant that Park got closer to the spring of truth than any other representative of his educated century. One cannot help noticing that in this sense Carlyle's thought resembles Rousseau's ideas more than Fichte's perspective, however, the basis here is the readiness to subdue oneself to Providence, and through this they shared the principle features of the equality of all men.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, Thomas Carlyle stood for the position that all men are originally weak, and this weakness makes them all equal not to each other but equal in the face of Nature, or, speaking in terms of philosophy of history, Providence. The only way to overcome one's weakness is to turn one's face to hero and worship his might and power, by which the very Nature manifests itself.

The Scottish philosopher was a remarkable opponent of any liberal, or, as he called it, *Laissez-faire* programmes; being a friend to J. S. Mill, he never said a word for his utilitarian or positive world view. This consistency makes Carlyle both a significant and notorious person (and thinker) of the XIX century up to nowadays, to say nothing of the contemporaries. So, one of the leading political writer of the time, Friedrich Engels, characterized Carlyle's *Past and Present* as "the only [book] which strikes a human chord, presents human relations and shows traces of a human point of view" [11]. A hundred years later, J. S. Mill's godson lord Bertrand Russell expressed quite an opposing to Marx's companion's opinion: "Since Rousseau and Kant, there have been two schools of liberalism, which may be distinguished as the hard-headed and the soft-hearted. The hard-headed developed, through Bentham, Ricardo, and Marx, by logical stages into Stalin; the soft-hearted, by other logical stages, through Fichte, Byron, Carlyle, and Nietzsche, into Hitler" [12, p. 642]. Having labelled him as a *pre-step to Hitler*, Russell basically voiced a common attitude to Carlyle's doctrine of hero-worship, mentioning in his memoirs that he read him "with a good deal of interest" though "with a complete repudiation of his purely sentimental arguments in favour of religion" [13, p. 30]. Still, this precise case could be a good illustration to a good old Hegel's dictum that common sense is indeed too common to deal with truth.

Thomas Carlyle lived and worked in such a period of human history when Cartesian thesis about *res cogitans* and *res extensa* was recognized as a foundation of the mathematical explanation of everything; it was when positivism emerged showing jubilant Europe another — and, in the opinion of many conservative thinkers, — dark side of the Romantic will to conquer the whole world. Later, the Cartesian model was acknowledged as only the means to discern the human from the natural (it was prevalent until the 1830s),

but then the perspective on the problem changed diametrically. Thus, voices of those who could not reconcile with the quantitative attitude to natural and moral life became more and more distinct, and one could draw up a significant list of so-called conservative thinkers of the XIX century embodying *Zeitgeist* of the age of steam and engines. Anyway, Carlyle was among those who stood for the traditional values and views as a necessary basis for the humanity, and his works demonstrate contemporary readers that there is also a qualitative, transcendent level of philosophizing. This very level must be considered if one does not wish to withdraw into the realms where a man and man's position in the world could be *numbered* but not really *counted*.

## Postscript

In the end, we would like to draw the reader's attention to a quite eloquent coincidence in the history of the reception of Carlyle in Russia. It is true that the Scottish philosopher made a considerable impact on such thinkers as Leo Tolstoy — in the library in Yasnaya Polyana there are books by Carlyle speckled with marks in the margins<sup>3</sup>. Social philosophers like Nikolai Mikhailovsky, Nikolai Berdyaev and Mikhail Gershenzon experienced a strong and fruitful influence of Carlyle's ideas. Among the others, one of the first Carlyle's translators in the Russian Empire was Valentin Ivanovich Yakovenko (1859–1915), an active revolutionary and a classic representative of Russian intelligentsia; he was a champion of the British prophet in the Tsarist Russia and translated his “On Heroes...” into Russian (first published in 1891), in addition to writing the first biographical sketch of the author. His son, Boris V. Yakovenko (1888–1948), was a rather prolific author and translator from various European languages, and became a well-known scholar of J. G. Fichte's legacy. This is just a fact that, to our mind, demands no special interpretation — still it seems to be quite significant and illustrious that two members of one family dedicated their attention and efforts to those who enjoyed the reputation of the most powerful metaphysicians, even Prophets in their native lands, and one of whom was a source of great inspiration for the other.

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<sup>3</sup> I owe this notice to Ms. Anna Antropovskaya, then a staff-member at Leo Tolstoy's museum.



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## Время свободы: учение о субъекте в творчестве Томаса Карлейля

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Томас Карлейль был современником Огюста Конта и Джона Стюарта Милля, столпов классического позитивизма, и тем не менее он стремился не к характерному для утилитаристской традиции, но к онтологическому обоснованию статуса субъекта. Иммануил Кант показал, что субъект является гносеологической установкой, имеющей существенное значение для выхода в поле чистой метафизики; радикальный же кантианец Г. В. Ф. Гегель подчинил весь ход логики, природы и истории процессу самопознания Абсолютного Духа. В творчестве Карлейля мы находим достаточно любопытный метод: он старается показать, что историческое лицо («герой») является субъектом истории, значит, он подчинен Провидению, или Природе. На этом основании герой наделен статусом оружия в руках Провидения. Хотя подобная точка зрения представляет собой продуманный подход к созданию качественного, или метафизического, описания человека (в отличие от характерного для естественных наук и положительной философии количественного подхода), она неминуемо приводит к парадоксальному положению «слабого и сильного»; в нашей статье это рассматривается как «парадокс Карлейля». То, что Карлейль черпает философское вдохновение из традиции немецкого идеализма, также существенно. Весьма показательным здесь оказывается учение Иоганна Готлиба Фихте о назначении человека. В итоге мы видим, что учение Карлейля о почитании героев понимается им как учение о свободе: быть свободным означает для него сознательно принять на себя бремя Провидения и реализовать его в качестве собственного жизненного проекта.

**Ключевые слова:** Томас Карлейль, консерватизм, почитание героев, учение о свободе, либерализм *laissez-faire*, парадокс Карлейля.

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