

Introduction

THE SIX THINKERS whose ideas I propose to examine were prominent just before and just after the French Revolution. The questions they discussed were among the perennial questions of political philosophy, and, to the extent to which political philosophy is a branch of morals, moral philosophy also. Moral and political philosophy are vast subjects, and I do not here wish to analyse what they are. Suffice it to say that for our purposes we can, with a certain amount of exaggeration and simplification, reduce the questions to one and one only, namely: 'Why should an individual obey other individuals? Why should any one individual obey either other individuals or groups or bodies of individuals?' There are, of course, a great many other questions, such as 'Under what circumstances do people obey?' and 'When do they cease to obey?', and also questions apart from obedience, questions about what is meant by the State, by society, by the individual, by laws, and so forth. But for the purposes of political philosophy, as opposed to descriptive political theory or sociology, the central question seems to me to be precisely this one: 'Why should anyone obey anyone else?'

The six thinkers with whom I am concerned – Helvétius, Rousseau, Fichte, Hegel, Saint-Simon and Maistre – dealt with these questions at times not very distant from each other. Helvétius died in 1771 and Hegel in 1831; the period concerned is therefore not very much more than half a century. The six also have certain qualities in common in virtue of which it is interesting to consider them. To begin with, they were all born

in what might be called the dawn of our own period. I do not know how to describe this period – it is often referred to as that of liberal democracy, or of the ascendancy of the middle class. At any rate, they were born at the beginning of a period of which we are perhaps living at the end. But whether or not this period is passing, as some people think, it is clear that these are the earliest thinkers to speak a language which is still directly familiar to us.

No doubt there were great political thinkers before them, and perhaps more original ones also. Plato and Aristotle, Cicero and St Augustine, Dante and Machiavelli, Grotius and Hooker, Hobbes and Locke enunciated ideas which in certain respects were more profound, more original, bolder and more influential than those of the thinkers I shall discuss. But these other thinkers are divided from us by history, we cannot read them altogether easily or with familiarity, they need a kind of translation. No doubt we can see how our ideas derive from the ideas of these earlier thinkers, but they are not identical with them, whereas I should like to maintain that the six thinkers in question speak a language which still speaks directly to us.

When Helvétius denounces ignorance or cruelty or injustice or obscurantism; when Rousseau delivers his passionate diatribes against the arts and the sciences and the intelligentsia, and speaks (or thinks he speaks) for the simple human soul; when Fichte and Hegel glorify the great organised whole, the national organisation to which they belong, and speak of dedication and mission and national duty and the joys of identifying oneself with other people in the performance of a common task; when Saint-Simon speaks of the great frictionless society of producers of the future, in which workers and capitalists will be united in a single, rational system, and all our economic ills, and with them all our other sufferings as well, will at last and for ever be over; when, finally, Maistre gives his horrifying picture of life as a perpetual struggle between plants and animals and human beings, a blood-soaked field in which men – puny, weak and

vicious – are engaged in perpetual extermination of each other unless held back by the most vigorous and violent discipline, and only at times rise beyond themselves to some huge agony of self-immolation or self-sacrifice – when these ideas are enunciated, they speak to us and to our age.

This is another thing which is interesting about these thinkers. Although they lived towards the end of the eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth, the kind of situation to which they seem relevant, which they seem to have perceived, to have described with an uncanny insight, is often characteristic not so much of the nineteenth century as of the twentieth. It is our period and our time which they seem to analyse with astonishing foresight and skill. That, too, makes them worthy of our consideration.

When I say that they have these curious powers of prediction, I should like to say that they are prophets in another sense also. Bertrand Russell once said that the important consideration to keep in mind when reading the theories of the great philosophers (other than mathematicians or logicians, who deal with symbols and not with empirical facts or human characteristics) is that they all had a certain central vision of life, of what it was and what it should be; and all the ingenuity and the subtlety and the immense cleverness and sometimes profundity with which they expound their systems, and with which they argue for them, all the great intellectual apparatus which is to be found in the works of the major philosophers of mankind, is as often as not but the outworks of the inner citadel – weapons against assault, objections to objections, rebuttals of rebuttals, an attempt to forestall and refute actual and possible criticisms of their views and their theories; and we shall never understand what it is they really want to say unless we penetrate beyond this barrage of defensive weapons to the central coherent single vision within, which as often as not is not elaborate and complex, but simple, harmonious and easily perceptible as a single whole.

All our six thinkers had some such vision. What they did was bind it upon their disciples, their readers, and indeed even upon some of their opponents. For one of the ways in which a philosopher or a thinker can be great is by doing precisely that. One might almost say that thinkers may be divided into two kinds. In the first place there are those who answered questions which had previously been put, and which had tormented men before, and answered them with a degree of perception, of insight, of genius, in such a way that these particular questions never needed to be asked again, at least in the fashion in which they had been asked before. Newton, for example, was a thinker of this type. He answered questions which had puzzled many men before; he answered them with simplicity, with lucidity, and provided an answer of immense power and coherence. This could also be said of Berkeley and of Hume, and of thinkers who are not strictly professional philosophers, for example of Tocqueville, or of a novelist like Tolstoy. These are all people who answered the ancient, tormenting questions which had puzzled mankind for many centuries, and answered them in such a way that for some people at any rate this seemed to be the final solution.

But there are thinkers who are great in another way, namely, not by answering questions which had been put before, but by altering the nature of the questions themselves, by transforming the angle of vision from which the questions seemed to be questions; not so much by solving the problems as by so powerfully affecting the people to whom they talked as to cause them to see things 'in a very different light', in which what had been a puzzle and a question before no longer arose, or at any rate did not arise with quite such urgency. And if the questions are modified, the solutions no longer seem to be required. People who do this tamper with the very categories, with the very framework, through which we see things. This kind of tampering can of course be very dangerous, and can cast both light and darkness upon humanity. I have in mind thinkers like Plato and Pascal, Kant

and Dostoevsky, who in some special sense are regarded as ‘more profound’, ‘deeper’ thinkers than other men of genius, because they penetrate to a level where they affect people in a way which transforms their entire vision of life, so that they come out, as it were, almost converted, as if they had undergone a religious conversion.

I do not wish to claim for the six thinkers that they were all, or all equally, men of genius, of dangerous genius, in this remarkable sense. What distinguishes them is that those who followed their views, those who were affected by them, were not affected by this argument or that argument, did not see such thinkers simply as the end of a long period of elaboration consisting of other thinkers of whom they were merely the leaders, or to whom they were merely superior in some way. Rather they were affected by them as one is affected by someone who suddenly transforms one’s view of things by placing them in a different relationship from that in which they were before. In this respect, too, all six are thoroughly deserving of our close consideration.

There is another quality, and a more curious one, which is common to them. Although they all discussed the problem of human liberty, and all, except perhaps Maistre, claimed that they were in favour of it – indeed some of them passionately pleaded for it and regarded themselves as the truest champions of what they called true liberty, as opposed to various specious or imperfect brands of it – yet it is a peculiar fact that in the end their doctrines are inimical to what is normally meant, at any rate, by individual liberty, or political liberty. This is the liberty which was preached by the great English and French liberal thinkers, for example; liberty in the sense in which it was conceived by Locke and by Tom Paine, by Wilhelm von Humboldt and by the liberal thinkers of the French Revolution, Condorcet and his friends, and, after the Revolution, Constant and Madame de Staël; liberty in the sense in which the substance of it was what John Stuart Mill said that it was, namely the right freely to

shape one's life as one wishes, the production of circumstances in which men can develop their natures as variously and richly, and, if need be, as eccentrically, as possible. The only barrier to this is formed by the need to protect other men in respect of the same rights, or else to protect the common security of them all, so that I am in this sense free if no institution or person interferes with me except for its or his own self-protection.

In this sense all the six thinkers were hostile to liberty, their doctrines were in certain obvious respects a direct contradiction of it, and their influence upon mankind not only in the nineteenth century, but particularly in the twentieth, was powerful in this anti-libertarian direction. There is hardly any need to add that in the twentieth century this became the most acute of all problems. Since the way in which these men formulated the problem, being among the earliest to do so, is particularly fresh, particularly vivid and particularly simple, the problem is often best examined in this pristine form, before it gets covered over with too many nuances, with too much discussion, with too many local and temporal variations.

Let us now return to the central question which all political philosophers sooner or later must ask: 'Why should anyone obey anyone else?' By the time Helvétius began writing, this question had been answered altogether too variously. He was living at a time when, in other provinces of human interest, in the sciences for example, enormous strides had been made, particularly in the late sixteenth century and the seventeenth century, by men like Galileo and Descartes and Kepler, and that group of distinguished Dutchmen whose names I shall not cite, and who contributed so much to the subject, although their unique merits are still relatively unrecognised.

But all these men were overtopped by Newton, whose eminence was unique in the annals of mankind. Among all the men of his age the radiation of his name and achievement really was the greatest. He was praised by the poets, he was praised by the

prose writers. He was regarded almost as a semi-divine being. He was so regarded because people thought that at last the whole of physical nature had been adequately and completely explained. This was because Newton had triumphantly managed to express in very few, very simple and very easily communicable formulae laws from which every movement and every position of every particle of matter in the universe could in principle be deduced. Everything which had previously been explained by other means, sometimes theologically, sometimes in terms of obscure metaphysics, at last seemed bathed in the light of the new science. Everything was interconnected, everything was harmonious, everything could be deduced from everything else. The laws in terms of which this could be done were, again, very few and easily acquired by anyone who chose to take the trouble to learn them. One needed for this no special faculty, no theological insight, no metaphysical gifts, merely the power of clear reasoning and of impartial observation, and of verifying observations by means of specially arranged experiment wherever this was possible.

In the sphere of politics, in the sphere of morals, no such co-ordinating principle, no such authority, could apparently be found. If it was asked why I should obey the ruler or rulers of the State, why anyone should ever obey anyone else, the answers were altogether too many and too various. Because, as some said, this was the word of God, vouchsafed in a sacred text of supernatural origin; or perhaps by direct revelation to men whose authority in these matters is recognised through the medium of a Church; or perhaps given by direct revelation to the individual himself. Or because God had himself ordained the great pyramid of the world – that is what someone like Filmer said in the seventeenth century, for example, or the great French bishop Bossuet. The king must be obeyed because this is the order of the world, commanded by God, and perceived by both reason and faith, and the commands of God are absolute, and to ask for the source of their authority is itself impious. Because, said others, the command to

obey the ruler is issued by the ruler, or by his agents. The law *is* what the ruler wills, and because he wills it, whatever his motive, it may not be examined at all. That is the theory of absolute monarchy.

Because, still other people said, the world has been created (or perhaps, as some said, exists uncreated) in order to fulfil a particular plan or purpose. This view is called natural teleology, according to which the universe is a kind of gradual unrolling of a divine scroll, or perhaps a self-unrolling of a scroll in which God is regarded as immanent. That is to say, the whole of the world is a kind of self-development, the gradual development of an incarnate architect's plan. In terms of this great plan everything in the universe has a unique place, that is, has a place which derives from its function, from the fact that it is needed by the plan to perform this particular task, live this particular life, if it is to fit into the general harmony. That is why everything in the universe is as it is and where and when it is, and acts and behaves as it does. I myself, since I am what I am, where I am and when I am, and in the particular circumstances in which I happen to be placed, must fulfil my function in such a place only by acting and being thus and thus, and not otherwise; by obeying this rather than that authority, because that is part of the plan, part of the scheme of things. If I do not do this, and of course in a minor way I may be able to obstruct the plan, then I shall be disturbing the harmony of the design, and frustrate others, and ultimately frustrate myself, and so be unhappy. In the end the plan is more powerful than I, and if I disobey it too far I shall be crushed by the gradual working out of the plan, which will sweep me away.

Some people modified this view and said it may not be absolutely indispensable that you fulfil your part of the plan, not quite inexorable, for the plan is not quite so tight and inevitable as all that, but perhaps it is the most convenient or economical or rational method of securing that necessary minimum which a man needs for the purpose of being happy, or being well, or

anyhow in order that life should prove not too intolerable to him. There was still a plan, though you could live to some degree outside it, but not so well, not so comfortably, not so satisfyingly as by adjusting yourself to it.

These are by no means all the types of view which were expressed. Some said that I possess certain inalienable rights, implanted in me from birth by nature or by God (say rights to life or liberty or property), which were said to be inherent in me, clear for all considering men to see. These rights entailed the obligation to obey, and the right to be obeyed by, certain persons in certain ways on certain occasions. Again, there were people who said I must obey this or that king or government because I have undertaken to do it. This is the theory of the contract, the social compact, by which I have agreed to abide in my own interests, because I thought that unless I did so I should not obtain as much as I could in co-operation and collaboration with others. Or perhaps I never actually promised to do this myself, perhaps others promised this on my behalf. Or perhaps this promise never actually historically took place, but is 'implicit' in the way I behave. I behave as if it had taken place, even if it did not; and if I go back on it, then I shall be going back on my word, or somebody else's word on my behalf, and that is contrary to moral law, because promises ought to be kept. Others, again, said that I obey as I obey because I am conditioned to do so, by my education or by my environment, or by social pressure or by the fear of being made to suffer if I do not. There were still others who said that I was ordered to obey by something called the general will, or by an inner voice called conscience, or by something called moral sense, with which the general will is in some way identified, or of which it is a kind of socialised version.

There were, again, people who said that I obey because in doing so I fulfil the demand of the world spirit, or the 'historical mission' of my nation or my Church, or of my class or of my race, or of my calling. There were people who said I obey because

I have a leader and he has bound a spell on me. Or else I obey because I owe it to my family or to my friends, or to my ancestors or posterity, or to the poor and oppressed whose labours have created me – and I always do what is expected of me. Finally, it has been said that I obey because I wish to do so, because I like it, and I shall stop obeying when and as I please; or simply that I obey for reasons which I feel but cannot explain.

Some of these answers answer the question ‘Why do I obey?’ and some of them answer the question ‘Why should I obey?’, which of course is not the same question. Kant’s very sharply drawn distinction between the two was destined to form a new period in the history of the entire subject. But what is important is that the entire topic had become a scandal in the eighteenth century. If scientific method could institute some degree of order in chemistry, in physics, in astrophysics, in astronomy and so forth, why did we have to be plunged into this dreadful chaos of conflicting opinions, with not a thread to guide us? Why should some assert one thing and others counter-assert another, some be faithful sons of the Church and some be atheists, some believe in metaphysics and others believe in a private conscience, some believe that the truth is to be found in a laboratory and others that it resides in some inspired teacher or prophet, so that nobody is able to institute the kind of order which Newton established in the great realm of nature? Naturally enough, men’s wishes began to move towards the delineation of some simple single principle which would guarantee just such order and yield truths of just such an objective, general, lucid, irrefutable kind as had so successfully been obtained concerning the external world.

One of the people who made the most determined effort to do this is my first thinker, *Helvétius*.