

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

Isaiah Berlin: The Power of Ideas

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2002, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

For COURSE PACK and other PERMISSIONS, refer to entry on previous page. For more information, send e-mail to permissions@pupress.princeton.edu

MY INTELLECTUAL PATH

I

OXFORD PHILOSOPHY BEFORE THE SECOND WORLD WAR

MY INTEREST in philosophical issues started when I was an undergraduate at Oxford in the late 1920s and early 1930s, because philosophy was part of the course which at that time a great many students in Oxford pursued. As a result of a continuing interest in this field I was appointed in 1932 to teach philosophy, and my views at that time were naturally influenced by the kind of discussions that my philosophical contemporaries held in Oxford. There were plenty of other issues in philosophy, but as it happens the topics which my colleagues and I concentrated on were the fruits of a return to empiricism which began to dominate British philosophy before the First World War, under the influence mainly of two celebrated Cambridge philosophers, G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell.

Verificationism

The first topic which occupied our attention in the middle and late 1930s was the nature of meaning – its relation to truth and falsehood, knowledge and opinion, and in particular the test of meaning in terms of the verifiability of the propositions in which it was expressed. The impulsion towards this topic came from the members of the Vienna School, themselves disciples of Russell and greatly influenced by thinkers such as Carnap, Wittgenstein and Schlick. The fashionable view was that the meaning of a proposition was the way in which it was verifiable – that if there was no way whatever of verifying what was being said, it was not a statement capable of truth or falsehood, not factual, and therefore either meaningless or a case of some other use of language, as seen in commands or expressions of desire, or in imaginative literature,

or in other forms of expression which did not lay claim to empirical truth.

I was influenced by this school in the sense of being absorbed in the problems and theories which it generated, but I never became a true disciple. I always believed that statements that could be true or false or plausible or dubious or interesting, while indeed they did relate to the world as empirically conceived (and I have never conceived of the world in any other way, from then to the present day), were nevertheless not necessarily capable of being verified by some simple knock-down criterion, as the Vienna School and their logical positivist followers asserted. From the beginning I felt that general propositions were not verifiable in that way. Statements, whether in ordinary use or in the natural sciences (which were the ideal of the Vienna School), could be perfectly meaningful without being strictly verifiable. If I said 'All swans are white', I would never know if I knew this about all the swans there were, or whether the number of swans might not be infinite; a black swan no doubt refuted this generalisation, but its positive verification in the full sense seemed to me unattainable; nevertheless it would be absurd to say that it had no meaning. The same was true about hypothetical propositions, and still more so about unfulfilled hypotheticals, of which it was plainly paradoxical to maintain that they could be shown to be true or false by empirical observation; yet they were clearly meaningful.

I thought of a great many other statements of this kind, which clearly had meaning in the full sense of the word, but whose meaning escaped the narrow criterion proposed, that of direct empirical observation – the world of the senses. Consequently, though I took a lively part in these discussions (indeed, what later came to be called Oxford Philosophy began in my rooms in the evenings, at gatherings attended by such later celebrated philosophers as A. J. Ayer, J. L. Austin and Stuart Hampshire, influenced as they all were by Oxford empiricism, and to some degree by Oxford realism – that is, the belief that the external world is independent of human observers), nevertheless I remained a heretic, though a friendly one. I have never departed from the views I held at that time, and still believe that while empirical experience is all that words can express – that there is no other reality – nevertheless verifiability is not the only, or indeed the most plausible, criterion of knowledge or beliefs or hypotheses.

This has remained with me for the rest of my life, and has coloured everything else that I have thought.

Another topic which I offered for the attention of my young colleagues was the status of such propositions as 'This pink (shade) is more like this vermilion than it is like this black.' If generalised, it was clear that this was a truth which no experience was likely to refute – the relations of visible colours being fixed. At the same time the general proposition could not be called a priori because it did not proceed formally from any definitions, and did not therefore belong to the formal disciplines of logic or mathematics, in which alone a priori propositions, then regarded as tautologies, belong. So we had found a universal truth in the empirical sphere. What were the definitions of 'pink', 'vermilion' and the rest? They had none. The colours could be recognised only by looking, so that their definitions were classified as ostensive, and from such definitions nothing logically followed. This came close to the old problem of Kant's synthetic a priori propositions, and we discussed this and its analogues for many months. I was convinced that my proposition was, if not strictly a priori, self-evidently true, and that its contradictory was not intelligible. Whether my colleagues ever raised the matter again I do not know, but the topic entered formally into the discussions held by us at the time. It corresponded to a view of Russell's embodied in a work called *The Limits of Empiricism*.

Phenomenalism

The other main topic that my contemporaries discussed was phenomenalism – that is, the question of whether human experience was confined to that provided by the senses, as was taught by the British philosophers Berkeley and Hume (and in some of their writings by Mill and Russell), or whether there existed a reality independent of sensible experience. For some philosophers, like Locke and his followers, there was such a reality, although it was not directly accessible to us – a reality which caused the sensible experiences which are all that we can directly know. Other philosophers held that the external world was a material reality which could be perceived directly, or misperceived as the case might be: this was called realism, as opposed to the view that our world was entirely created by human faculties – reason, imagination and the like – which was called idealism, in which I never

believed. I have never believed in any metaphysical truths – whether rationalist truths, as expounded by Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and, in his own very different fashion, Kant, or the truths of (objective) idealism, the fathers of which are Fichte, Friedrich Schelling and Hegel, who still have their disciples. Thus meaning, truth and the nature of the external world were the topics which I thought about, and to some extent wrote about – and some of my views on them have been published.¹

One of the intellectual phenomena which made the greatest impact on me was the universal search by philosophers for absolute certainty, for answers which could not be doubted, for total intellectual security. This from the very beginning appeared to me to be an illusory quest. No matter how solidly based, widespread, inescapable, ‘self-evident’ a conclusion or a direct datum may seem to be, it is always possible to conceive that something could modify or indeed upset it, even if one cannot at the moment imagine what this might be. And this suspicion that a great deal of philosophy was set on an illusory path later came to dominate my ideas in a quite new and different connection.

While thus engaged in teaching and discussing the kind of philosophy I have outlined, I was commissioned to write a biography of Karl Marx. Marx’s philosophical views never appeared to me to be particularly original or interesting, but my study of his views led me to investigate his predecessors, in particular the French *philosophes* of the eighteenth century – the first organised adversaries of dogmatism, traditionalism, religion, superstition, ignorance, oppression. I acquired an admiration for the great task which the thinkers of the French Encyclopaedia had set themselves, and for the great work which they did to liberate men from darkness – clerical, metaphysical, political and the like. And although I came in due course to oppose some of the bases of their common beliefs, I have never lost my admiration for and sense of solidarity with the Enlightenment of that period: what I came to be critical of, apart from its empirical shortcomings, are some of its consequences, both logical and social; I realised that Marx’s dogmatism, and that of his followers, in part derived from the certainties of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

¹ See the author’s *Concepts and Categories* (op. cit., p. xii above, note 1).

II

HISTORY OF IDEAS AND POLITICAL THEORY

During the War I served as a British official. When I came back to Oxford to teach philosophy, I became preoccupied with two central problems. The first was monism – the central thesis of Western philosophy from Plato to our day – and the second, the meaning and application of the notion of freedom. I devoted a good deal of time to each, and they shaped my thought for a good many years to come.

Monism

Dazzled by the spectacular successes of the natural sciences in their own century and its predecessors, men such as Helvétius, Holbach, d'Alembert, Condillac, and propagandists of genius such as Voltaire and Rousseau, believed that, provided the right method was discovered, truth of a fundamental kind could be uncovered about social, political, moral and personal life – truth of the kind that had scored such triumphs in the investigations of the external world. The Encyclopaedists believed in scientific method as the only key to such knowledge; Rousseau and others believed in eternal truths discovered by introspective means. But however they differed, they belonged to a generation which was convinced that it was on the path to the solution of all the problems that had plagued mankind from its beginnings.

A wider thesis underlay this: namely, that to all true questions there must be one true answer and one only, all the other answers being false, for otherwise the questions cannot be genuine questions. There must exist a path which leads clear thinkers to the correct answers to these questions, as much in the moral, social and political worlds as in that of the natural sciences, whether it is the same method or not; and once all the correct answers to the deepest moral, social and political questions that occupy (or should occupy) mankind are put together, the result will represent the final solution to all the problems of existence. Of course, we may never attain to these answers: human beings may be too confused by their emotions, or too stupid, or too unlucky, to be able to arrive at them; the answers may be too difficult, the means may be lacking, the techniques too complicated to discover; but however

this may be, provided the questions are genuine, the answers must exist. If we do not know, our successors may know; or perhaps wise men in antiquity knew; and if they did not, perhaps Adam in Paradise knew; or if he did not, the angels must know; and if even they do not know, God must know – the answers must be there.

If the answers to social, moral and political questions are discovered, then, knowing them for what they are – the truth – men cannot fail to follow them, for they would have no temptation to do otherwise. And so a perfect life can be conceived. It may not be attainable, but in principle the conception must be capable of being formed – indeed, the possibility of discovering the only true answers to the great questions must in principle be believed in.

This creed was certainly not confined to the thinkers of the Enlightenment, though the methods recommended by others differ. Plato believed that mathematics was the route to truth, Aristotle, perhaps, that it was biology; Jews and Christians sought the answers in sacred books, in the pronouncements of divinely inspired teachers and the visions of mystics; others believed that the laboratory and mathematical methods could settle things; still others believed, like Rousseau, that only the innocent human soul, the uncorrupted child, the simple peasant would know the truth – better than the corrupt inhabitants of societies ruined by civilisation. But what they all agreed about, as did their successors after the French Revolution, who may have supposed the truth more difficult to obtain than their more naïve and optimistic predecessors,¹ was that the laws of historical development could be – and by then had been – discovered, that the answers to the questions of how to live and what to do – morality, social life, political organisation, personal relationships – are all capable of being organised in the light of the truths discovered by the correct methods, whatever those may be.

This is a *philosophia perennis* – what men, thinkers, have believed from the pre-Socratics to all the reformers and revolutionaries of our own age. It is the central belief on which human thought has rested for two millennia. For if no true answers to questions exist, how can knowledge ever be attainable in any

¹ Fourier, an early socialist, and Saint-Simon believed in a scientifically organised society. For Saint-Simon it was to be headed by bankers and scientists, and inspired by artists and poets. Their successors were the French socialists, such as Cabet, Pecqueur, Louis Blanc and the terrorist Blanqui, and, in the end, Marx and Engels and their followers.

province? This was the heart of European rational, and indeed spiritual, thought for many ages. No matter that people differ so widely, that cultures differ, moral and political views differ; no matter that there is a vast variety of doctrines, religions, moralities, ideas – all the same there must somewhere be a true answer to the deepest questions that preoccupy mankind.

I do not know why I always felt sceptical about this almost universal belief, but I did. It may be a matter of temperament, but so it was.

Giambattista Vico

What first shook me was my discovery of the works of the eighteenth-century Italian thinker Giambattista Vico. He was the first philosopher, in my view, to have conceived the idea of cultures. Vico wanted to understand the nature of historical knowledge, of history itself: it was all very well to lean on the natural sciences as far as the external world was concerned, but all they could provide us with was an account of the behaviour of rocks or tables or stars or molecules. In thinking about the past, we go beyond behaviour; we wish to understand how human beings lived, and that means understanding their motives, their fears and hopes and ambitions and loves and hatreds – to whom they prayed, how they expressed themselves in poetry, in art, in religion. We are able to do this because we are ourselves human, and understand our own inner life in these terms. We know how a rock, or a table, behaves because we observe it and make conjectures and verify them; but we do not know why the rock wishes to be as it is – indeed, we think it has no capacity for wishing, or for any other consciousness. But we do know why we are what we are, what we seek, what frustrates us, what expresses our inmost feelings and beliefs; we know more about ourselves than we shall ever know about rocks or streams.

True knowledge is knowledge of why things are as they are, not merely what they are; and the more we delve into this, the more we realise that the questions asked by the Homeric Greeks are different from the questions asked by the Romans, that the questions asked by the Romans differ from those asked in the Christian Middle Ages or in the seventeenth-century scientific culture or Vico's own eighteenth-century days. The questions

differ, the answers differ, the aspirations differ; the use of language, of symbols, differs; and the answers to one set of questions do not answer, do not have much relevance to, the questions of other cultures. Of course Vico was a pious Roman Catholic, and he believed that the Church alone could provide the answers. But be that as it may, it did not prevent him from formulating the original idea that cultures differ, that what matters to a fifth-century Greek is very different from what matters to a Red Indian or a Chinese or a scientist in an eighteenth-century laboratory; and therefore their outlooks differ, and there are no universal answers to all their questions. Of course there is a common human nature, otherwise men in one age could not understand the literature or the art of another, or, above all, its laws, about which Vico, as a jurist, knew most. But that did not prevent there being a wide variety of cultural experience, so that activity of one kind was relevant to activity of some other kind within a single culture, but did not share such close links with the parallel activity in another culture.

J. G. Herder

Then I read a far more relevant thinker, namely the German philosopher and poet Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder was not the first (his teacher, Johann Georg Hamann, has that honour) to deny the doctrine of his French contemporaries that there are universal, timeless, unquestionable truths which hold for all men, everywhere, at all times; and that the differences are simply due to error and illusion, for the truth is one and universal – ‘quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est’.¹ Herder believed that different cultures gave different answers to their central questions. He was more interested in the humanities, the life of the spirit, than in the external world; and he became convinced that what was true for a Portuguese was not necessarily true for a Persian. Montesquieu had begun to say this kind of thing, but even he, who believed that men were shaped by environment, by what he called ‘climate’, was in the end a universalist – he believed that the central truths were eternal, even if the answers to local and ephemeral questions might be different.

¹ ‘What is believed everywhere, always, by everyone.’ Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium* 2. 3.

Herder laid it down that every culture possesses its own 'centre of gravity';¹ each culture has its own points of reference; there is no reason why these cultures should fight each other – universal toleration must be possible – but unification was destruction. Nothing was worse than imperialism. Rome, which crushed native civilisations in Asia Minor in order to produce one uniform Roman culture, committed a crime. The world was a great garden in which different flowers and plants grew, each in its own way, each with its own claims and rights and past and future. From which it followed that no matter what men had in common – and of course, again, there was a common nature to some degree – there were no universally true answers, as valid for one culture as for another.

Herder is the father of cultural nationalism. He is not a political nationalist (that kind of nationalism had not developed in his time), but he believed in the independence of cultures and the need to preserve each in its uniqueness. He believed that the desire to belong to a culture, something that united a group or a province or a nation, was a basic human need, as deep as the desire for food or drink or liberty; and that this need to belong to a community where you understood what others said, where you could move freely, where you had emotional as well as economic, social and political bonds, was the basis of developed, mature human life. Herder was not a relativist, though he is often so described: he believed that there were basic human goals and rules of behaviour, but that they took wholly different forms in different cultures, and that consequently, while there may have been analogies, similarities, which made one culture intelligible to another, cultures were not to be confused with each other – mankind was not one but many, and the answers to the questions were many, though there might be some central essence to them all which was one and the same.

Romanticism and its offspring

This idea was developed further by the romantics, who said something wholly new and disturbing: that ideals were not objective truths written in heaven and needing to be understood, copied, practised by men; but that they were created by men.

¹ *Herder's sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan (Berlin, 1877–1913), vol. 5, p. 509.

Values were not found, but made; not discovered, but generated – that is what some of the German romantics certainly believed, as against the objectivist, universalising tendency of the superficial French. Uniqueness mattered. A German poet writes poetry in German, in language which, in the course of writing, he to some degree creates: he is not simply a writer in German. The German artist is a maker of German paintings, poems, dances – and so in all other cultures. A Russian thinker, Alexander Herzen, once asked, ‘Where is the song before it is sung?’¹ Where indeed? ‘Nowhere’ is the answer – one creates the song by singing it, by composing it. So, too, life is created by those who live it, step by step. This is an aesthetic interpretation of morality and of life, not an application of eternal models. Creation is all.

From this sprang all kinds of diverse movements – anarchism, romanticism, nationalism, Fascism, hero-worship. I make my own values, maybe not consciously: and besides, who is ‘I’? For Byronic romantics, ‘I’ is indeed an individual, the outsider, the adventurer, the outlaw, he who defies society and accepted values, and follows his own – it may be to his doom, but this is better than conformity, enslavement to mediocrity. But for other thinkers ‘I’ becomes something much more metaphysical. It is a collective – a nation, a Church, a Party, a class, an edifice in which I am only a stone, an organism of which I am only a tiny living fragment. *It* is the creator; I myself matter only in so far as I belong to the movement, the race, the nation, the class, the Church; I do not signify as a true individual within this super-person to whom my life is organically bound. Hence German nationalism: I do this not because it is good or right or because I like it – I do it because I am a German and this is the German way to live. So also modern existentialism – I do it because I commit myself to this form of existence. Nothing makes me; I do not do it because it is an objective order which I obey, or because of universal rules to which I must adhere; I do it because I create my own life as I do; being what I am, I give it direction and I am responsible for it. Denial of universal values, this emphasis on being above all an element in, and loyal to, a super-self, is a dangerous moment in European history, and has led to a great deal that has been

¹ See A. I. Gertsen, *Sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* (Moscow, 1954–66) [hereafter SS], vol. 6, pp. 33 and 335. Subsequent references to this edition are by volume and page, thus: SS vi 33.

destructive and sinister in modern times; this is where it begins, in the political ruminations and theories of the earliest German romantics and their disciples in France and elsewhere.¹

I never for a moment accepted the idea of these super-egos, but I recognised their importance in modern thought and action. Slogans like ‘Not I but the Party’, ‘Not I but the Church’, ‘My country right or wrong, but my country’ have inflicted a wound on the central faith of human thought as I outlined it above – that the truth is universal, eternal, for all men at all times – from which it has never recovered. Mankind not as an object but as a subject, an ever-moving spirit, self-creating and self-moving, a self-composed drama in many acts, which, according to Marx, will end in some kind of perfection – all this issues from the romantic revolution. While I reject this huge metaphysical interpretation of human life *in toto* – I remain an empiricist, and know only what I am able to experience, or think I could experience, and do not begin to believe in supra-individual entities – nevertheless I own that it made some impact on me, in the following way.

Pluralism

I came to the conclusion that there is a plurality of ideals, as there is a plurality of cultures and of temperaments. I am not a relativist; I do not say ‘I like my coffee with milk and you like it without; I am in favour of kindness and you prefer concentration camps’ – each

¹ The romantics viewed their notion of self-moving centres of historical activity, thrusting forward on their own terms, as ultimately subjective. These were arbitrary entities – whether Byronic, somewhat satanic figures at war with society, or heroes who mould around themselves groups of followers (robbers, in the case of Schiller’s play) or entire nations (Lycurgus, Moses – nation-builders so much admired by Machiavelli – to whom there are certainly modern parallels) – creating in accordance with freely invented patterns. This view was sternly opposed by such thinkers as Hegel and Marx, who taught, each in his own fashion, that progress must conform to the iron laws of historical development – whether material development, as in Marx, or spiritual, as in Hegel. Only thus can the emancipation of human powers from irrational drives be achieved, and a reign be ushered in of total justice, freedom, virtue, happiness and harmonious self-realisation. This idea of inexorable progress is inherited from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, but without the notions of the inscrutable divine will or the Last Judgement of mankind – the separation of the satisfactory sheep from the unsatisfactory goats – conducted after death.

of us with his own values, which cannot be overcome or integrated. This I believe to be false. But I do believe that there is a plurality of values which men can and do seek, and that these values differ. There is not an infinity of them: the number of human values, of values which I can pursue while maintaining my human semblance, my human character, is finite – let us say 74, or perhaps 122, or 26, but finite, whatever it may be. And the difference this makes is that if a man pursues one of these values, I, who do not, am able to understand why he pursues it or what it would be like, in his circumstances, for me to be induced to pursue it. Hence the possibility of human understanding.

I think these values are objective – that is to say, their nature, the pursuit of them, is part of what it is to be a human being, and this is an objective given. The fact that men are men and women are women and not dogs or cats or tables or chairs is an objective fact; and part of this objective fact is that there are certain values, and only those values, which men, while remaining men, can pursue. If I am a man or a woman with sufficient imagination (and this I do need), I can enter into a value-system which is not my own, but which is nevertheless something I can conceive of men pursuing while remaining human, while remaining creatures with whom I can communicate, with whom I have some common values – for all human beings must have some common values or they cease to be human, and also some different values else they cease to differ, as in fact they do.

That is why pluralism is not relativism – the multiple values are objective, part of the essence of humanity rather than arbitrary creations of men's subjective fancies. Nevertheless, of course, if I pursue one set of values I may detest another, and may think it is damaging to the only form of life that I am able to live or tolerate, for myself and others; in which case I may attack it, I may even – in extreme cases – have to go to war against it. But I still recognise it as a human pursuit. I find Nazi values detestable, but I can understand how, given enough misinformation, enough false belief about reality, one could come to believe that they are the only salvation. Of course they have to be fought, by war if need be, but I do not regard the Nazis, as some people do, as literally pathological or insane, only as wickedly wrong, totally misguided about the facts, for example in believing that some beings are subhuman, or that race is central, or that Nordic races alone are

truly creative, and so forth. I see how, with enough false education, enough widespread illusion and error, men can, while remaining men, believe this and commit the most unspeakable crimes.

If pluralism is a valid view, and respect between systems of values which are not necessarily hostile to each other is possible, then toleration and liberal consequences follow, as they do not either from monism (only one set of values is true, all the others are false) or from relativism (my values are mine, yours are yours, and if we clash, too bad, neither of us can claim to be right). My political pluralism is a product of reading Vico and Herder, and of understanding the roots of romanticism, which in its violent, pathological form went too far for human toleration.

So with nationalism: the sense of belonging to a nation seems to me quite natural and not in itself to be condemned, or even criticised. But in its inflamed condition – my nation is better than yours, I know how the world should be shaped and you must yield because you do not, because you are inferior to me, because my nation is top and yours is far, far below mine and must offer itself as material to mine, which is the only nation entitled to create the best possible world – it is a form of pathological extremism which can lead, and has led, to unimaginable horrors, and is totally incompatible with the kind of pluralism which I have attempted to describe.

It may be of interest to remark, incidentally, that there are certain values that we in our world accept which were probably created by early romanticism and did not exist before: for example, the idea that variety is a good thing, that a society in which many opinions are held, and those holding different opinions are tolerant of each other, is better than a monolithic society in which one opinion is binding on everyone. Nobody before the eighteenth century could have accepted that: the truth was one and the idea of variety was inimical to it. Again, the idea of sincerity, as a value, is something new. It was always right to be a martyr to the truth, but only to the truth: Muslims who died for Islam were poor, foolish, misled creatures who died for nonsense; so, for Catholics, were Protestants and Jews and pagans; and the fact that they held their beliefs sincerely made them no better – what was important was to be right. In discovering the truth, as in every other walk of life, success was what was important, not motive. If a man says to you that he believes that twice two is seventeen, and someone says,

‘You know, he doesn’t do it to annoy you, he doesn’t do it because he wants to show off or because he has been paid to say it – he truly believes, he is a sincere believer’, you would say, ‘This makes it no better, he is talking irrational nonsense.’ That is what Protestants were doing, in the view of Catholics, and vice versa. The more sincere, the more dangerous; no marks were given for sincerity until the notion that there is more than one answer to a question – that is, pluralism – became more widespread. That is what led value to be set on motive rather than on consequence, on sincerity rather than on success.

The enemy of pluralism is monism – the ancient belief that there is a single harmony of truths into which everything, if it is genuine, in the end must fit. The consequence of this belief (which is something different from, but akin to, what Karl Popper called essentialism – to him the root of all evil) is that those who know should command those who do not. Those who know the answers to some of the great problems of mankind must be obeyed, for they alone know how society should be organised, how individual lives should be lived, how culture should be developed. This is the old Platonic belief in the philosopher-kings, who were entitled to give orders to others. There have always been thinkers who hold that if only scientists, or scientifically trained persons, could be put in charge of things, the world would be vastly improved. To this I have to say that no better excuse, or even reason, has ever been propounded for unlimited despotism on the part of an élite which robs the majority of its essential liberties.

Someone once remarked that in the old days men and women were brought as sacrifices to a variety of gods; for these, the modern age has substituted new idols: -isms. To cause pain, to kill, to torture are in general rightly condemned; but if these things are done not for my personal benefit but for an -ism – socialism, nationalism, Fascism, Communism, fanatically held religious belief, or progress, or the fulfilment of the laws of history – then they are in order. Most revolutionaries believe, covertly or overtly, that in order to create the ideal world eggs must be broken, otherwise one cannot obtain the omelette. Eggs are certainly broken – never more violently or ubiquitously than in our times – but the omelette is far to seek, it recedes into an infinite distance. That is one of the corollaries of unbridled monism, as I call it – some call it fanaticism, but monism is at the root of every extremism.

Freedom

Political freedom is a topic to which I devoted two lectures during the 1950s. The later of these, entitled 'Two Concepts of Liberty',¹ inaugurated my Oxford Professorship, and its gist was to distinguish between two notions of liberty (or freedom – the terms are used interchangeably), negative and positive. By negative liberty I meant the absence of obstacles which block human action. Quite apart from obstacles created by the external world, or by the biological, physiological, psychological laws which govern human beings, there is lack of political freedom – the central topic of my lecture – where the obstacles are man-made, whether deliberately or unintentionally. The extent of negative liberty depends on the degree to which such man-made obstacles are absent – on the degree to which I am free to go down this or that path without being prevented from doing so by man-made institutions or disciplines, or by the activities of specific human beings.

It is not enough to say that negative freedom simply means freedom to do what I like, for in that case I can liberate myself from obstacles to the fulfilment of desire simply by following the ancient Stoics and killing desire. But that path, the gradual elimination of the desires to which obstacles can occur, leads in the end to humans being gradually deprived of their natural, living activities: in other words, the most perfectly free human beings will be those who are dead, since then there is no desire and therefore no obstacles. What I had in mind, rather, was simply the number of paths down which a man can walk, whether or not he chooses to do so. That is the first of the two basic senses of political freedom.

Some have maintained, against me, that freedom must be a triadic relationship: I can overcome or remove or be free from obstacles only in order to do something, to be free to perform a given act or acts. But I do not accept that. The basic sense of unfreedom is that in which we ascribe it to the man in jail, or the man tied to a tree; all that such a man seeks is the breaking of his chains, escape from the cell, without necessarily aiming at a particular activity once he is liberated. In the larger sense, of course, freedom means freedom from the rules of a society or its

¹ Delivered in 1958, and available in two collections of essays by the author: *Four Essays on Liberty* (London and New York, 1969) and *The Proper Study of Mankind* (see p. ix above, note 1).

institutions, from the deployment against one of excessive moral or physical force, or from whatever shuts off possibilities of action which otherwise would be open. This I call 'freedom from'.

The other central sense of freedom is freedom *to*: if my negative freedom is specified by answering the question 'How far am I controlled?', the question for the second sense of freedom is 'Who controls me?' Since we are talking about man-made obstacles, I can ask myself 'Who determines my actions, my life? Do I do so, freely, in whatever way I choose? Or am I under orders from some other source of control? Is my activity determined by parents, schoolmasters, priests, policemen? Am I under the discipline of a legal system, the capitalist order, a slave-owner, the government (monarchical, oligarchic, democratic)? In what sense am I master of my fate? My possibilities of action may be limited, but how are they limited? Who are those who stand in my way, how much power can they wield?'

These are the two central senses of 'liberty' which I set myself to investigate. I realised that they differed, that they were answers to two different questions; but, although cognate, they did not in my view clash – the answer to one did not necessarily determine the answer to the other. Both freedoms were ultimate human ends, both were necessarily limited, and both concepts could be perverted in the course of human history. Negative liberty could be interpreted as economic *laissez-faire*, whereby in the name of freedom owners are allowed to destroy the lives of children in mines, or factory-owners to destroy the health and character of workers in industry. But that was a perversion, not what the concept basically means to human beings, in my view. Equally it was said that it is a mockery to inform a poor man that he is perfectly free to occupy a room in an expensive hotel, although he may not be able to pay for it. But that, too, is a confusion. He is indeed free to rent a room there, but has not the means of using this freedom. He has not the means, perhaps, because he has been prevented from earning more than he does by a man-made economic system – but that is a deprivation of freedom to earn money, not of freedom to rent the room. This may sound a pedantic distinction, but it is central to discussions of economic versus political freedom.

The notion of positive freedom has led, historically, to even more frightful perversions. Who orders my life? I do. I? Ignorant, confused, driven hither and thither by uncontrolled passions and

drives – is that all there is to me? Is there not within me a higher, more rational, freer self, able to understand and dominate passions, ignorance and other defects, which I can attain to only by a process of education or understanding, a process which can be managed only by those who are wiser than myself, who make me aware of my true, ‘real’, deepest self, of what I am at my best? This is a well-known metaphysical view, according to which I can be truly free and self-controlled only if I am truly rational – a belief which goes back to Plato – and since I am not perhaps sufficiently rational myself, I must obey those who are indeed rational, and who therefore know what is best not only for themselves but also for me, and who can guide me along lines which will ultimately awaken my true rational self and put it in charge, where it truly belongs. I may feel hemmed in – indeed, crushed – by these authorities, but that is an illusion: when I have grown up and have attained to a fully mature, ‘real’ self, I shall understand that I would have done for myself what has been done for me if I had been as wise, when I was in an inferior condition, as they are now.

In short, they are acting on my behalf, in the interests of my higher self, in controlling my lower self; so that true liberty for the lower self consists in total obedience to them, the wise, those who know the truth, the élite of sages; or perhaps my obedience must be to those who understand how human destiny is made – for if Marx is right, then it is a Party (which alone grasps the demands of the rational goals of history) which must shape and guide me, whichever way my poor empirical self may wish to go; and the Party itself must be guided by its far-seeing leaders, and in the end by the greatest and wisest leader of all.

There is no despot in the world who cannot use this method of argument for the vilest oppression, in the name of an ideal self which he is seeking to bring to fruition by his own, perhaps somewhat brutal and *prima facie* morally odious, means (*prima facie* only for the lower empirical self). The ‘engineer of human souls’, to use Stalin’s phrase,¹ knows best; he does what he does

¹ Stalin used the phrase ‘engineers of human souls’ in a speech on the role of Soviet writers made at Maxim Gorky’s house on 26 October 1932, recorded in an unpublished manuscript in the Gorky archive – K. L. Zelinsky, ‘Vstrecha pisatelei s I. V. Stalinym’ (‘A meeting of writers with I. V. Stalin’) – and published for the first time, in English, in A. Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia, 1928–39* (Basingstoke and London, 1991), pp. 128–31: for this phrase see p. 131 (and, for the Russian original, ‘inzheneriy chelovecheskikh dush’, I. V. Stalin, *Sochineniya* (Moscow, 1946–67), vol. 13, p. 410). Ed.

not simply in order to do his best for his nation, but in the name of the nation itself, in the name of what the nation would be doing itself if only it had attained to this level of historical understanding. That is the great perversion which the positive notion of liberty has been liable to: whether the tyranny issues from a Marxist leader, a king, a Fascist dictator, the masters of an authoritarian Church or class or State, it seeks for the imprisoned, 'real' self within men, and 'liberates' it, so that this self can attain to the level of those who give the orders.

This goes back to the naïve notion that there is only one true answer to every question: if I know the true answer and you do not, and you disagree with me, it is because you are ignorant; if you knew the truth, you would necessarily believe what I believe; if you seek to disobey me, this can be so only because you are wrong, because the truth has not been revealed to you as it has been to me. This justifies some of the most frightful forms of oppression and enslavement in human history, and it is truly the most dangerous, and, in our century in particular, the most violent, interpretation of the notion of positive liberty.

This notion of two kinds of liberty and their distortions then formed the centre of much discussion and dispute in Western and other universities, and does so to this day.

Determinism

My other lecture on freedom was entitled 'Historical Inevitability'.¹ Here I stated that determinism was a doctrine very widely accepted among philosophers for many hundreds of years. Determinism declares that every event has a cause, from which it unavoidably follows. This is the foundation of the natural sciences: the laws of nature and all their applications – the entire body of natural science – rest upon the notion of an eternal order which the sciences investigate. But if the rest of nature is subject to these laws, can it be that man alone is not? When a man supposes, as most ordinary people do (though not most scientists and philosophers), that when he rises from the chair he need not have done so, that he did so because he chose to do so, but he need not have chosen – when he supposes this, he is told that this is an illusion, that even

¹ Delivered in 1953, and also included both in *Four Essays on Liberty* and in *The Proper Study of Mankind*.

though the necessary work by psychologists has not yet been accomplished, one day it will be (or at any rate in principle can be), and then he will know that what he is and does is necessarily as it is, and could not be otherwise. I believe this doctrine to be false, but I do not in this essay seek to demonstrate this, or to refute determinism – indeed, I am not sure if such a demonstration or refutation is possible. My only concern is to ask myself two questions. Why do philosophers and others think that human beings are fully determined? And, if they are, is this compatible with normal moral sentiments and behaviour, as commonly understood?

My thesis is that there are two main reasons for supporting the doctrine of human determinism. The first is that, since the natural sciences are perhaps the greatest success story in the whole history of mankind, it seems absurd to suppose that man alone is not subject to the natural laws discovered by the scientists. (That, indeed, is what the eighteenth-century *philosophes* maintained.) The question is not, of course, whether man is wholly free of such laws – no one but a madman could maintain that man does not depend on his biological or psychological structure or environment, or on the laws of nature. The only question is: Is his liberty totally exhausted thereby? Is there not some corner in which he can act as he chooses, and not be determined to choose by antecedent causes? This may be a tiny corner of the realm of nature, but unless it is there, his consciousness of being free, which is undoubtedly all but universal – the fact that most people believe that, while some of their actions are mechanical, some obey their free will – is an enormous illusion, from the beginnings of mankind, ever since Adam ate the apple, although told not to do so, and did not reply, ‘I could not help it, I did not do it freely, Eve forced me to do it.’

The second reason for belief in determinism is that it does devolve the responsibility for a great many things that people do on to impersonal causes, and therefore leaves them in a sense unblameworthy for what they do. When I make a mistake, or commit a wrong or a crime, or do anything else which I recognise, or which others recognise, as bad or unfortunate, I can say, ‘How could I avoid it? – that was the way I was brought up’ or ‘That is my nature, something for which natural laws are responsible’ or ‘I belong to a society, a class, a Church, a nation, in which everyone does it, and nobody seems to condemn it’ or ‘I am psychologically

conditioned by the way in which my parents behaved to each other and to me, and by the economic and social circumstances in which I was placed, or was forced into, not to be able to choose to act otherwise' or, finally, 'I was under orders.'

Against this, most people believe that everyone has at least two choices that he can make, two possibilities that he can realise. When Eichmann says 'I killed Jews because I was ordered to; if I had not done it I would have been killed myself' one can say 'I see that it is improbable that you would have chosen to be killed, but in principle you could have done it if you had decided to do it – there was no literal compulsion, as there is in nature, which caused you to act as you did.' You may say it is unreasonable to expect people to behave like that when facing great dangers: so it is, but however unlikely it may be that they should decide to do so, in the literal sense of the word they *could* have chosen to do so. Martyrdom cannot be expected, but can be accepted, against whatever odds – indeed, that is why it is so greatly admired.

So much for the reasons for which men choose to embrace determinism in history. But if they do, there is a difficult logical consequence, to say the least. It means that we cannot say to anyone, 'Did you have to do that? Why need you have done that?' – the assumption behind which is that he could have refrained, or done something else. The whole of our common morality, in which we speak of obligation and duty, right and wrong, moral praise and blame – the way in which people are praised or condemned, rewarded or punished, for behaving in a way in which they were not forced to behave, when they could have behaved otherwise – this network of beliefs and practices, on which all current morality seems to me to depend, presupposes the notion of responsibility, and responsibility entails the ability to choose between black and white, right and wrong, pleasure and duty; as well as, in a wider sense, between forms of life, forms of government, and the whole constellations of moral values in terms of which most people, however much they may or may not be aware of it, do in fact live.

If determinism were accepted, our vocabulary would have to be very, very radically changed. I do not say that this is impossible in principle, but it goes further than what most people are prepared to face. At best, aesthetics would have to replace morality. You can admire or praise people for being handsome, or generous, or musical – but that is not a matter of their choice, that is 'how they

are made'. Moral praise would have to take the same form: if I praise you for saving my life at your own risk, I mean that it is wonderful that you are so made that you could not avoid doing this, and I am glad that I encountered someone literally determined to save my life, as opposed to someone else who was determined to look the other way. Honourable or dishonourable conduct, pleasure-seeking and heroic martyrdom, courage and cowardice, deceitfulness and truthfulness, doing right against temptation – these would become like being good-looking or ugly, tall or short, old or young, black or white, born of English or Italian parents: something that we cannot alter, for everything is determined. We can hope that things will go as we should like, but we cannot do anything towards this – we are so made that we cannot help but act in a particular fashion. Indeed, the very notion of an act denotes choice; but if choice is itself determined, what is the difference between action and mere behaviour?

It seems to me paradoxical that some political movements demand sacrifices and yet are determinist in belief. Marxism, for example, which is founded on historical determinism – the inevitable stages through which society must pass before it reaches perfection – enjoins painful and dangerous acts, coercion and killing, equally painful at times both to the perpetrators and to the victims; but if history will inevitably bring about the perfect society, why should one sacrifice one's life for a process which will, without one's help, reach its proper, happy destination? Yet there is a curious human feeling that if the stars in their courses are fighting for you, so that your cause will triumph, then you should sacrifice yourself in order to shorten the process, to bring the birth-pangs of the new order nearer, as Marx said. But can so many people be truly persuaded to face these dangers, just to shorten a process which will end in happiness whatever they may do or fail to do? This has always puzzled me, and puzzled others.

All this I discussed in the lecture in question, which has remained controversial, and has been much discussed and disputed, and is so still.

The pursuit of the ideal

There is one further topic which I have written about, and that is the very notion of a perfect society, the solution to all our ills. Some of the eighteenth-century French *philosophes* thought the

ideal society they hoped for would inevitably come; others were more pessimistic and supposed that human defects would fail to bring it about. Some thought that progress towards it was inexorable, others that only great human effort could achieve it, but might not do so. However this may be, the very notion of the ideal society presupposes the conception of a perfect world in which all the great values in the light of which men have lived for so long can be realised together, at least in principle. Quite apart from the fact that the idea had seemed Utopian to those who thought that such a world could not be achieved because of material or psychological obstacles, or the incurable ignorance, weakness or lack of rationality of men, there is a far more formidable objection to the very notion itself.

I do not know who else may have thought this, but it occurred to me that some ultimate values are compatible with each other and some are not. Liberty, in whichever sense, is an eternal human ideal, whether individual or social. So is equality. But perfect liberty (as it must be in the perfect world) is not compatible with perfect equality. If man is free to do anything he chooses, then the strong will crush the weak, the wolves will eat the sheep, and this puts an end to equality. If perfect equality is to be attained, then men must be prevented from outdistancing each other, whether in material or in intellectual or in spiritual achievement, otherwise inequalities will result. The anarchist Bakunin, who believed in equality above all, thought that universities should be abolished because they bred learned men who behaved as if they were superior to the unlearned, and this propped up social inequalities. Similarly, a world of perfect justice – and who can deny that this is one of the noblest of human values? – is not compatible with perfect mercy. I need not labour this point: either the law takes its toll, or men forgive, but the two values cannot both be realised.

Again, knowledge and happiness may or may not be compatible. Rationalist thinkers have supposed that knowledge always liberates, that it saves men from being victims of forces they cannot understand; to some degree this is no doubt true, but if I know that I have cancer I am not thereby made happier, or freer – I must choose between always knowing as much as I can and accepting that there are situations where ignorance may be bliss. Nothing is more attractive than spontaneous creativity, natural vitality, a free flowering of ideas, works of art – but these are not often compatible with a capacity for careful and effective planning,

without which no even moderately secure society can be created. Liberty and equality, spontaneity and security, happiness and knowledge, mercy and justice – all these are ultimate human values, sought for themselves alone; yet when they are incompatible, they cannot all be attained, choices must be made, sometimes tragic losses accepted in the pursuit of some preferred ultimate end. But if, as I believe, this is not merely empirically but conceptually true – that is, derives from the very conception of these values – then the very idea of the perfect world in which all good things are realised is incomprehensible, is in fact conceptually incoherent. And if this is so, and I cannot see how it could be otherwise, then the very notion of the ideal world, for which no sacrifice can be too great, vanishes from view.

To go back to the Encyclopaedists and the Marxists and all the other movements the purpose of which is the perfect life: it seems as if the doctrine that all kinds of monstrous cruelties must be permitted, because without these the ideal state of affairs cannot be attained – all the justifications of broken eggs for the sake of the ultimate omelette, all the brutalities, sacrifices, brain-washing, all those revolutions, everything that has made this century perhaps the most appalling of any since the days of old, at any rate in the West – all this is for nothing, for the perfect universe is not merely unattainable but inconceivable, and everything done to bring it about is founded on an enormous intellectual fallacy.