

# THE CROOKED TIMBER OF HUMANITY

CHAPTERS IN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS



ISAIAH BERLIN

*Edited by Henry Hardy*

Second Edition

*Foreword by John Banville*

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For Jon Stallworthy

[A]us so krummem Holze, als woraus der Mensch gemacht  
ist, kann nichts ganz Gerades gezimmert werden.

Out of the crooked timber of humanity  
no straight thing was ever made.

Immanuel Kant<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The translation given above is IB's customary one. More literally: 'Out of timber as crooked as that from which man is made nothing entirely straight can be built.' Immanuel Kant, 'Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht' ('Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', 1784), *Kant's gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin, 1900– ), viii 23. 22; see also xi below. Cf. Ecclesiastes 7. 13: 'Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight, which he hath made crooked?'

## THE CROOKED TIMBER OF HUMANITY

ISAIAH BERLIN WAS BORN IN RIGA, now capital of Latvia, in 1909. When he was six, his family moved to Russia; there in 1917, in Petrograd, he witnessed both Revolutions – Social Democratic and Bolshevik. In 1921 his family came to England, and he was educated at St Paul's School, London, and Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

At Oxford he was a Fellow of All Souls, a Fellow of New College, Professor of Social and Political Theory, and founding President of Wolfson College. He also held the Presidency of the British Academy. In addition to *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, his main published works are *Karl Marx, Russian Thinkers, Concepts and Categories, Against the Current, Personal Impressions, The Sense of Reality, The Proper Study of Mankind, The Roots of Romanticism, The Power of Ideas, Three Critics of the Enlightenment, Freedom and Its Betrayal, Liberty, The Soviet Mind* and *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*. As an exponent of the history of ideas he was awarded the Erasmus, Lippincott and Agnelli Prizes; he also received the Jerusalem Prize for his lifelong defence of civil liberties. He died in 1997.

Henry Hardy, a Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford, is one of Isaiah Berlin's Literary Trustees. He has edited (or co-edited) many other books by Berlin, including the first three volumes of his letters, and is currently working on the remaining volume.

John Banville's novels include *The Book of Evidence* and *The Sea*, which won the 2005 Man Booker Prize, and, most recently, *The Infinities*. He is a longstanding enthusiast for Berlin's writing, and has reviewed many of his books for the *Irish Times*.

*For further information about Isaiah Berlin visit*  
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## CONTENTS

<i>Foreword by John Banville</i>	xi
<i>Editor's Preface</i>	xix
<i>Note on References</i>	xxvi
The Pursuit of the Ideal	i
The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West	21
Giambattista Vico and Cultural History	51
Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought	73
Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism	95
Appendix: Violence and Terror	178
European Unity and Its Vicissitudes	186
The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will: The Revolt against the Myth of an Ideal World	219
The Bent Twig: On the Rise of Nationalism	253
<i>Appendix to the Second Edition</i>	279
<i>Index</i>	335



## FOREWORD

*John Banville*

ISAIAH BERLIN WAS ONE of the most exciting thinkers of the twentieth century, and the essays in this volume, written over three decades, from the end of the 1950s to the 1980s, address some of the most urgent topics of our time. The excitement derives immediately from Berlin's unique tone of voice, which is the same on the page as it was in the lecture hall or before the microphone. He spoke with terrifying rapidity – Joseph Brodsky said his English was even faster than his Russian, 'courting the speed of light'<sup>1</sup> – in sentences of a length and complexity rarely encountered outside the pages of Proust. Yet he was never less than straightforward in his meaning, and the ideas and insights were rolled off with sparkling clarity. 'This darting, leaping style of speaking', his biographer, Michael Ignatieff, writes, 'is a style of thinking: he outlines a proposition and anticipates objections and qualifications as he speaks, so that both proposition and qualification are spun out in one and the same sentence simultaneously.'<sup>2</sup>

The result, for reader as for listener, brings on a curious kind of giddiness, a sensation of fizzing intellectual delight, as if one were being whirled round and round on a marvellously noisy

<sup>1</sup> 'Isaiah Berlin at Eighty', *New York Review of Books*, 17 August 1989, 44–5, at 44.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (London/New York, 1998), 4.

carousel. Who would have thought a book subtitled 'Chapters in the History of Ideas' would afford so much fun?

From the start Berlin was cast into the thick of things, and stayed there for the rest of his long life. He was born in 1909 in Riga, a former Hanseatic trading port and the capital of what is now Latvia and was then a province of the Russian empire. He was the only surviving child of a wealthy Jewish couple who later moved to Petrograd – St Petersburg – where they lived through the February and October Revolutions of 1917. The young Isaiah retained vivid memories of these events. In February he witnessed the anti-tsarist crowd surging through the streets on the way to storm the Winter Palace, and although he was only seven he understood something of the revolutionary euphoria that was sweeping the city.

The experience that left the most profound impression, however, was a brush with mob violence that he had one day at the end of the February Revolution when he was out for a walk with his governess. He remembered stopping to examine a volume by Jules Verne on sale on a pavement bookstall when a gang of men rushed past dragging a terrified policeman off to be lynched. Michael Ignatieff writes: 'Much later, in the 1930s, when contemporaries were intoxicated with revolutionary Marxism, the memory of 1917 continued to work within Berlin, strengthening his horror of physical violence and his suspicion of political experiment, and deepening his lifelong preference for all the temporising compromises that keep a political order safely this side of terror.'<sup>1</sup>

By the 1930s the Berlins were settled in London, to which they had emigrated in 1921. Isaiah was eleven when the family came to Britain, and spoke hardly any English – he knew some forty English words, he later said, including the lyrics of *Daisy Bell* (*A Bicycle Built for Two*) – although within a year he had

<sup>1</sup> *ibid.* 24.

become fluent in the language. He was a brilliant student, first at St Paul's School in London and later at Corpus Christi, Oxford. By the age of 23 he had been elected to a fellowship at All Souls. He was to be an Oxford man all his life, save for the war years, when he worked for British Information Services in New York, and then at the British Embassies in Washington and Moscow. At the end of the war he met the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, a legendary encounter that was to have lasting repercussions for both of them, and that led to intensified harsh treatment of Akhmatova by the Soviet authorities.

These ventures into the great restive forests beyond the tranquil groves of academe brought a certain disapproval down upon Berlin from the professional philosophical community. Indeed, all through his life he was regarded as slightly suspect by the Oxbridge high consistory, although he numbered among his close friends the philosophers Stuart Hampshire, J. L. Austin and A. J. Ayer, who, even more than Berlin, was a *bon vivant* and enthusiastic partygoer. And he was the main mover in the setting up, in 1966, of Wolfson College, Oxford, a project that, as Ignatieff remarks, meant that 'Berlin had to call on reserves of political acumen that his friends never suspected.'<sup>1</sup> The funds for the college came from the Ford Foundation and the Wolfson Foundation, set up by Sir Isaac Wolfson, the president of Great Universal Stores. Both of these institutions Berlin had wooed and won; no wonder there were sniffs from high table.

Berlin the activist was all of a piece with Berlin the philosopher. He had a deep and engrossing interest in the world of commonplace experience, and believed firmly that it is the thinker's duty to be ever alive to the lessons of history and to engage with the broad politics of his time. His wartime dispatches from Washington became famous among Whitehall and War Office policymakers. Having no specific area of duty or expertise at the

<sup>1</sup> *ibid.* 264.

embassy, Berlin 'was free', his biographer writes, 'to range across all of official Washington, lunching, dining, gossiping, and once a week assembling the materials for a digest of American opinion to be sent to the Foreign Office, and through them to other Whitehall departments, including the Cabinet Office'.<sup>1</sup> His weekly reports were read by, among others, Winston Churchill and the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden. These were the official versions; clandestinely, another version, the 'bootleg' one, containing the gossip which would have been, as he said, 'found too dazzling by the twilight denizens of Whitehall',<sup>2</sup> was sent to his friends in London. Imagine, in the midst of rationing, blackouts and nightly bombing raids, being the recipient of one of *those* incandescent missives from across the ocean.

Berlin was, then, a kind of ideal melding of philosopher and practical man of affairs. Yet he had no illusions as to the extent of what could be achieved in the sphere either of thought or of action. 'We can do only what we can: but that we must do, against difficulties.'<sup>3</sup> He knew that his cautiously meliorist view of human affairs and human problems was unlikely to set racing the pulses of impatient young men and women of good intent, and would certainly not stay the hands of 'the prophets with armies at their backs'.<sup>4</sup> Yet he held to the view that, 'perhaps, the best that one can do is to try to promote some kind of equilibrium, necessarily unstable, between the different aspirations of differing groups of human beings – at the very least to prevent them from attempting to exterminate each other, and, so far as possible, to prevent them from hurting each other'. This, he admits, 'is not, *prima facie*, a wildly exciting programme [...] not a passionate battle-cry to inspire men to sacrifice and martyrdom

<sup>1</sup> *ibid.* 112.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from H. G. Nicholas to Berlin, 21 May 1943, quoted *ibid.* 113.

<sup>3</sup> 19 below (subsequent plain numbers also refer to the present volume).

<sup>4</sup> I.

and heroic feats'.<sup>1</sup> Yet what he advocates may be the most that can be done, and, as such, surely, as he said, it must be done.

The central tenet of Berlin's political and social philosophy is, like all sound principles, entirely simple, and he states it again and again throughout his work. He believes in and sets the highest store by the doctrine of pluralism, as he called it. In the first essay here, the ironically titled 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', he sets out a plain definition of what pluralism means:

the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathising and deriving light from each other [...]. Intercommunication between cultures in time and space is possible only because what makes men human is common to them, and acts as a bridge between them.<sup>2</sup>

The danger, of course, is that pluralism will be confused with relativism – mere relativism, one is tempted to say – and in 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', the core ideas of which will have echoes throughout this collection, Berlin is determined to make a distinction between the two, and to make us recognise and accept the distinction. Thinkers such as Vico and Herder, he writes, and even the much maligned Machiavelli, argue that members of one culture can readily understand 'the values, the ideals, the forms of life of another culture or society, even those remote in time or space'.<sup>3</sup> These 'foreign' or 'alien' values may be found unacceptable, 'but if [people] open their minds sufficiently they can grasp how one might be a full human being, with whom one could communicate, and at the same time live in the light of values widely different from one's own, but which nevertheless one can see to be values, ends of life, by the realisation of which men could be fulfilled'.<sup>4</sup> This is the pluralist view; relativism is altogether different: 'I take it to mean a doctrine according to

<sup>1</sup> 47.

<sup>2</sup> 11.

<sup>3</sup> 9.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

which the judgement of a man or a group, since it is the expression or statement of a taste, or emotional attitude or outlook, is simply what it is, with no objective correlate which determines its truth or falsehood.<sup>1</sup> As he insists elsewhere, "There is a world of objective values."<sup>2</sup>

Robert Silvers, the editor of the *New York Review of Books* and a good friend of Berlin's, recalls Berlin telling him how one night at an Oxford table the guests were asked to name the figure from the past they would most have wished to have had dinner with, and Berlin without hesitation named William James. That the author of *A Pluralistic Universe* should seem an ideal dining companion for a latter-day champion of pluralism is not surprising. It reminds us of the similarities between these two wonderful, wise and accommodating figures. James, like Berlin, was a philosopher whose hands were plunged deep in the common life of men, and Berlin would surely have endorsed James's recommendation of 'incompleteness, "more", uncertainty, insecurity, possibility, fact, novelty, compromise, remedy and success'<sup>3</sup> as desiderata for a fulfilled and useful life. Both men maintained an enthusiasm for variety and heterodoxy and an openness to the world that is both exemplary and endearing.

Like all exciting books, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* has its heroes and its villains, but, given the author's subtlety of mind and breadth of temperament, they vary in their villainy and their heroism, and sometimes, indeed, switch roles. The collection is beautifully constructed – what a devoted, scrupulous and creative editor Berlin has in Henry Hardy – and forms a classic arch shape.<sup>4</sup> The keystone is the magisterial essay, one of Berlin's finest,<sup>5</sup> on Joseph de Maistre. This frightening figure

<sup>1</sup> 80.<sup>2</sup> 10.<sup>3</sup> William James, *Manuscript Lectures* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 426.<sup>4</sup> As Alan Bullock has pointed out, how apt it is that a volume entitled *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* should end with an essay called "The Bent Twig".<sup>5</sup> In 1960 he submitted the essay to the *Journal for the History of Ideas*, which effectively turned it down, asking for such heavy cuts and revisions that he was bound to



had slipped somewhat into the shadows until Berlin, with all due reservations and caveats, drew him out into the light of day again to fill us with shock and awe. Worked on over decades and in 1960 put away for further revisions, which were never made, the piece traces the twisted strands of Maistre's relentlessly ferocious thinking, which is at once atavistic and prophetic. An ultra-ultramontane Catholic, Maistre from his diplomatic exile in St Petersburg called down elegantly formulated execrations on revolutionaries, Romantics, empiricists, liberals, technocrats, secularists, egalitarians, while approving only the pope, or at least the papacy, the Jesuits and the few surviving antediluvians like himself – 'français, catholique, gentilhomme',<sup>1</sup> in Berlin's characterisation – who might be counted on to stand in the way of the filthy modern tide. The essay is a splendid thing, invigorating and alarming in equal measure, and shows Berlin at his comprehensive and pellucid best.

Was he the last of a line, the final full stop to the great winding melodious sentence which intellectual Jewry had been writing since Moses descended the mount bearing the tablets of the law? One of his most admirable traits was his relentless and humorous self-depreciation, even if at times it smacked faintly of disingenuousness. 'I have not the slightest faith in anything I write myself,' he told a correspondent. 'It is exactly like money – if you make it yourself, it seems a forgery.'<sup>2</sup> In the case of his work, we, his readers, have the luxury of disagreeing. Few more authentic and compelling voices sounded in the blood-boltered century that we have just survived, by the skin of our teeth.

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abandon the attempt to publish it, as he did. As Henry Hardy has remarked, this was rather like the *Journal of Theology* turning down one of Saint Paul's epistles on the grounds that it was repetitive and covered too much familiar ground.

<sup>1</sup> 98.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Berlin to Jack Stephenson, 21 January 1963, quoted by Ignatieff, *op. cit.* (xi/2), 262.



## EDITOR'S PREFACE

Neither a be-all nor an end-all be.  
Dreamt by J. L. Austin<sup>1</sup>

THIS BOOK BEGAN LIFE AS the fifth of four volumes. At the end of the 1970s, in the four-volume series that began life under the collective title *Selected Writings*,<sup>2</sup> I brought together most of the essays so far published by Isaiah Berlin which had not hitherto been made available in a collected form. His many writings had been scattered, often in obscure places, most were out of print, and only half a dozen essays had previously been collected and reissued.<sup>3</sup> Those four volumes, together with the list of his publications which one of them (*Against the Current*) contained,<sup>4</sup> the first edition of the present volume, a volume of shorter pieces,<sup>5</sup> and five volumes in which I published much of

<sup>1</sup> 'Pretending', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary vol. 32 (1958), 278/16 ('I dreamt a line that would be a motto for a sober philosophy').

<sup>2</sup> *Russian Thinkers* (co-edited with Aileen Kelly: London and New York, 1978; 2nd ed., London etc., 2008), *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* (London, 1978; New York, 1979), *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (London, 1979; New York, 1980; 2nd ed., Princeton, 2013) and *Personal Impressions* (London, 1980; New York, 1981; 2nd expanded ed., London, 1998; Princeton, 2001). The present volume was first published in London in 1990, and in New York in 1991.

<sup>3</sup> *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969), now incorporated in *Liberty* (Oxford and New York, 2002), and *Vico and Herder* (1976), now incorporated in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (London and Princeton, 2000). Other collections had appeared only in translation.

<sup>4</sup> Its most up-to-date printed version appeared in the first Princeton University Press edition (2001), but it is also posted in regularly updated form on the official website of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust, 'The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library', <<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/>>.

<sup>5</sup> *The Power of Ideas* (London and Princeton, 2000).

his previously unpublished work,<sup>1</sup> made much more of his *oeuvre* readily accessible than before.

The present volume – first published in 1990, and devoted, like *Against the Current*, to the history of ideas – was effectively if not formally an additional volume of Berlin's *Selected Writings*. It contains one early essay which had never previously been published, three essays written in the 1980s, and four essays excluded from *Against the Current* for various reasons explained in my preface to that volume: three of these four had happily since become available for collective reissue; the fourth, 'The Bent Twig', omitted only because it was too similar to another essay in the volume on the same topic (nationalism), nevertheless contains much that is distinctive, and fully earned its place in this different company.

The essay published here for the first time, on Joseph de Maistre, had had a long gestation, starting in the 1940s if not before, and was put aside in 1960 as needing further revision, having been rejected on grounds both of length and of content by the *Journal of the History of Ideas*. However, it was so nearly ready for publication, and contained so much of value, that it seemed right to include it here. Although the author added a few new passages, and redrafted others, it was not revised in any systematic way to take full account of subsequent work on Maistre, which in any case did not affect its central theses.

The details of original publication of the essays reprinted from elsewhere are as follows:

<sup>1</sup> *The Magus of the North: J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism* (London, 1993; New York, 1994) – now incorporated in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* (xix/3) – *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History* (London, 1996; New York, 1997), *The Roots of Romanticism* (London and Princeton, 1999; 2nd ed., Princeton, 2013) *Freedom and its Betrayal* (London and Princeton, 2002), and finally *The Soviet Mind* (Washington, 2004), part of whose contents had been published before, sometimes pseudonymously. There is also a collection drawn from the whole range of his work, intended to provide the 'essential' Isaiah Berlin: *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (co-edited with Roger Hausheer: London, 1997; New York, 1998; 2nd ed., London, 2013).

- 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', an abbreviated version of which was read on 15 February 1988 at the ceremony in Turin at which the author was awarded the first Senator Giovanni Agnelli International Prize 'for the ethical dimension in advanced societies', was published privately by the Agnelli Foundation (in English and Italian), and also appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, 17 March 1988
- 'The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West' was published in Tokyo in 1978 by the Japan Foundation, and reprinted in J. M. Porter and Richard Vernon (eds), *Unity, Plurality and Politics: Essays in Honour of F. M. Barnard* (London and Sydney, 1986: Croom Helm)
- 'Giambattista Vico and Cultural History' was a contribution to Leigh S. Cauman and others (eds), *How Many Questions? Essays in Honor of Sidney Morgenbesser* (Indianapolis, 1983: Hackett)
- 'Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought' first appeared in the *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 3 (1980), and was reprinted with revisions in L. Pompa and W. H. Dray (eds), *Substance and Form in History: A Collection of Essays in Philosophy of History* (Edinburgh, 1981: University of Edinburgh Press)
- 'European Unity and its Vicissitudes', an address read on 21 November 1959 at the third Congress of the Fondation Européenne de la Culture in Vienna, was published as a pamphlet by the Foundation (in English and French) in Amsterdam in the same year
- 'The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will: The Revolt against the Myth of an Ideal World' was published in an Italian translation in *Lettere italiane* 27 (1975), and first appeared in its original English form in this volume
- 'The Bent Twig: On the Rise of Nationalism' appeared in *Foreign Affairs* 51 (1972)

Because the same or similar topics turn up in different contexts, some of the discussions in these essays, as in the case of those in other volumes, inevitably overlap to some degree. Each essay was written as a self-contained item, not leaning on preceding chapters or anticipating subsequent ones. Apart from necessary corrections, the previously published essays appear here essentially in their original form, with the addition of references where not originally provided.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In previous editions of this book there were no references for 'The Pursuit of the

New to this edition is the appendix, which includes both previously uncollected items that seem to me to belong in the same company as the principal contents, and letters that throw additional light on the topics or essays they discuss. Berlin's virtuoso review of Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy* tells us much about his own conception of philosophy and of the philosophers Russell treats, as well as trenchantly capturing Russell's strengths and weaknesses. The replies he published to Robert Kocis and Ronald H. McKinney, and his letter to Beata Polanowska-Sygulska, provide useful clarification of his notion of human nature – both the ways in which this is shared by everyone and the extent to which it differs from one group or individual to another. The relationship between human sameness and difference in Berlin's thought remains to be fully and clearly set out, and these pieces (among others) are important evidence for such an account. Letters to Alain Besançon and Piero Gastaldo flesh out aspects of his view of Joseph de Maistre, and a letter to Geert van Cleemput clarifies his views on benign national consciousness as against malign nationalism. I am grateful to Al Bertrand for help in selecting these items.

Since the new edition has been reset, the pagination differs from that of the first edition. This will cause some inconvenience to readers trying to follow up references to the first edition. I have therefore posted a concordance of the two editions at [http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published\\_works/cth/concordance.html](http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published_works/cth/concordance.html), so that references to one can readily be converted into references to the other.

The volume takes its title (at my suggestion) from Isaiah Berlin's preferred rendering of his favourite quotation from Kant: 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight

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Ideal' and 'The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will', essays originally published without notes. References were added for their later inclusion in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (xx/1), and have now been added here too.

thing was ever made.<sup>1</sup> He has always ascribed this translation to R. G. Collingwood, but it turns out that he has not left Collingwood's version untouched. The quotation does not appear in Collingwood's published writings, but among his unpublished papers there is a lecture on the philosophy of history, dating from 1929, in which the following rendering appears: 'Out of the cross-grained timber of human nature nothing quite straight can be made.'<sup>2</sup> It seems likely that Isaiah Berlin attended the lecture and was struck by this passage, which then matured in his memory.

I received generous help from a number of scholars in preparing this volume. Roger Hausheer, without whose advocacy the essay on Maistre would not have been included, also assisted in other ways too many and various to specify. Leofranc Holford-Strevens provided immediate answers to several arcane queries on which I should otherwise have had to spend many hours, in some cases fruitlessly. Richard Lebrun gave with astonishing generosity and effectiveness from his store of expert knowledge of Maistre. Frederick Barnard helped prodigiously with Herder and Locke. For solutions of individual problems I am indebted to John Batchelor, the late Clifford Geertz, David Klinck, Jean O'Grady, John M. Robson and Cedric Watts. My then wife Anne kindly double-checked the proofs. Pat Utechin, the author's late secretary, as usual gave unstinting and indispensable

<sup>1</sup> The original German, together with a more literal translation, appears as an epigraph on p. vii.

<sup>2</sup> It must be added that Collingwood did originally write 'crooked', but then crossed this out (it is still legible) and substituted 'cross-grained'. The substitution may post-date the delivery of the lecture; or the same passage may have been used in another version in another lecture which does not survive. The truth is probably not definitively recoverable. I should like to thank W. J. van der Dussen for pointing me to the right place in Collingwood's manuscripts, and Teresa Smith, Collingwood's daughter and literary executor, for allowing me to quote this sentence. Collingwood's papers are on deposit in the Bodleian Library, Oxford: the shelfmark for the lecture in question, headed 'II (T.T. 1929)', is 'Dep. Collingwood 12/6', and the quotation appears on fol. 3, reproduced overleaf, again with Teresa Smith's kind permission.

reconciliation of man's social and individualistic tendencies, ensuring him the greatest <sup>possible</sup> degree of individual freedom together with the greatest possible degree of social protection. ~~He~~ Kant was no doubt thinking of Rousseau, who stated the problem of political theory thus: — "To find a form of association which protects with the whole common force the person & property of each associate, & in virtue of which everyone, while uniting himself to all, only obeys himself & remains as free as before" (Contrat social, I, vi). In civil society, he says, each man interferes with the rest only in such a way as to stimulate them to self-improvement, like trees in a wood, which by depriving each other of light & air compel each other to grow taller and develop long straight stems. But the development of such a civil society of free and equal persons is an exceedingly difficult matter, for man is a brute that needs a master to restrain and dominate his brutishness; but he can only have human masters, and the supreme master of all is still only a man. Out of the ~~crooked~~ <sup>cross-grained</sup> timber of human nature nothing quite straight can be made. We cannot rely on finding perfection anywhere; and the problem of creating a ~~civilized~~ society which shall genuinely protect everyone's rights must therefore be solved, not by a change of heart in man, but by the building up of a system of international relationships governed by law. And the process of creating this system, once more, is set going by the operation of man's conflicting social instincts. War is an attempt — not an attempt on the part of men, but an attempt on the part of nature — to bring about new international relations by the destruction of the old, and so by degrees to approximate to a perfect international society. Kant seems to



support and assistance. If any of those named in this paragraph have died without my knowledge, I apologise to their shades for not signalling this fact.

*Henry Hardy*  
*Heswall, April 2012*

## NOTE ON REFERENCES

REFERENCES TO NOTES ARE given in the form '12/3', i.e. page 12, note 3. Such references are to the notes in the present volume unless indicated otherwise. References to multi-volume works are given in the form 'iv 56', i.e. volume 4, page 56. Where line numbers are printed in the source, these are given after the page number in the form 'iv 56. 7', i.e. volume 4, page 56, line 7.

# The Pursuit of the Ideal

## I

THERE ARE, IN MY VIEW, two factors that, above all others, have shaped human history in the twentieth century. One is the development of the natural sciences and technology, certainly the greatest success story of our time – to this, great and mounting attention has been paid from all quarters. The other, without doubt, consists in the great ideological storms that have altered the lives of virtually all mankind: the Russian Revolution and its aftermath – totalitarian tyrannies of both right and left and the explosions of nationalism, racism and, in places, religious bigotry which, interestingly enough, not one among the most perceptive social thinkers of the nineteenth century had ever predicted.

When our descendants, in two or three centuries' time (if mankind survives until then), come to look at our age, it is these two phenomena that will, I think, be held to be the outstanding characteristics of our century – the most demanding of explanation and analysis. But it is as well to realise that these great movements began with ideas in people's heads: ideas about what relations between men have been, are, might be and should be; and to realise how they came to be transformed in the name of a vision of some supreme goal in the minds of the leaders, above all of the prophets with armies at their backs. Such ideas are the substance of ethics. Ethical thought consists of the systematic examination of the relations of human beings to each other, the conceptions, interests and ideals from which human ways of treating one another spring, and the systems of value on which

such ends of life are based. These beliefs about how life should be lived, what men and women should be and do, are objects of moral enquiry; and when applied to groups and nations, and, indeed, mankind as a whole, are called political philosophy, which is but ethics applied to society.

If we are to hope to understand the often violent world in which we live (and unless we try to understand it, we cannot expect to be able to act rationally in it and on it), we cannot confine our attention to the great impersonal forces, natural and man-made, which act upon us. The goals and motives that guide human action must be looked at in the light of all that we know and understand; their roots and growth, their essence, and above all their validity, must be critically examined with every intellectual resource that we have. This urgent need, apart from the intrinsic value of the discovery of truth about human relationships, makes ethics a field of primary importance. Only barbarians are not curious about where they come from, how they came to be where they are, where they appear to be going, whether they wish to go there, and if so, why, and if not, why not.

The study of the variety of ideas about the views of life that embody such values and such ends is something that I have spent forty years of my long life in trying to make clear to myself. I should like to say something about how I came to become absorbed by this topic, and particularly about a turning-point which altered my thoughts about the heart of it. This will, to some degree, inevitably turn out to be somewhat autobiographical – from this I offer my apologies, but I do not know how else to give an account of it.

## II

When I was young I read *War and Peace* by Tolstoy, much too early. The real impact on me of this great novel came only later, together with that of other Russian writers, both novelists and social thinkers, of the mid-nineteenth century. These writers did much to shape my outlook. It seemed to me, and still does, that the purpose of these writers was not principally to give realistic accounts of the lives and relationships to one another of individuals or social groups or classes, not psychological or social analysis for its own sake – although, of course, the best of them achieved precisely this, incomparably. Their approach seemed to me essentially moral: they were concerned most deeply with what was responsible for injustice, oppression, falsity in human relations, imprisonment whether by stone walls or conformism – unprotesting submission to man-made yokes – moral blindness, egoism, cruelty, humiliation, servility, poverty, helplessness, bitter indignation, despair on the part of so many. In short, they were concerned with the nature of these experiences and their roots in the human condition: the condition of Russia in the first place, but, by implication, of all mankind. And conversely they wished to know what would bring about the opposite of this, a reign of truth, love, honesty, justice, security, personal relations based on the possibility of human dignity, decency, independence, freedom, spiritual fulfilment.

Some, like Tolstoy, found this in the outlook of simple people, unspoiled by civilisation; like Rousseau, he wished to believe that the moral universe of peasants was not unlike that of children, not distorted by the conventions and institutions of civilisation, which sprang from human vices – greed, egoism, spiritual blindness; that the world could be saved if only men saw the truth that lay at their feet; if they but looked, it was to be found in the Christian gospels, the Sermon on the Mount. Others among

these Russians put their faith in scientific rationalism, or in social and political revolution founded on a true theory of historical change. Others again looked for answers in the teachings of the Orthodox theology, or in liberal Western democracy, or in a return to ancient Slav values, obscured by the reforms of Peter the Great and his successors.

What was common to all these outlooks was the belief that solutions to the central problems existed, that one could discover them, and, with sufficient selfless effort, realise them on earth. They all believed that the essence of human beings was to be able to choose how to live: societies could be transformed in the light of true ideals believed in with enough fervour and dedication. If, like Tolstoy, they sometimes thought that man was not truly free but determined by factors outside his control, they knew well enough, as he did, that if freedom was an illusion it was one without which one could not live or think. None of this was part of my school curriculum, which consisted of Greek and Latin authors, but it remained with me.

When I became a student at the University of Oxford, I began to read the works of the great philosophers, and found that the major figures, especially in the field of ethical and political thought, believed this too. Socrates thought that if certainty could be established in our knowledge of the external world by rational methods (had not Anaxagoras arrived at the truth that the moon was many times larger than the Peloponnese, however small it looked in the sky?), the same methods would surely yield equal certainty in the field of human behaviour – how to live, what to be. This could be achieved by rational argument. Plato thought that an elite of sages who arrived at such certainty should be given the power of governing others intellectually less well endowed, in obedience to patterns dictated by the correct solutions to personal and social problems. The Stoics thought that the attainment of these solutions was in the power of any man who set himself to live according to reason. Jews, Christians,

Muslims (I knew too little about Buddhism) believed that the true answers had been revealed by God to his chosen prophets and saints, and accepted the interpretation of these revealed truths by qualified teachers and the traditions to which they belonged.

The rationalists of the seventeenth century thought that the answers could be found by a species of metaphysical insight, a special application of the light of reason with which all men were endowed. The empiricists of the eighteenth century, impressed by the vast new realms of knowledge opened by the natural sciences based on mathematical techniques, which had driven out so much error, superstition, dogmatic nonsense, asked themselves, like Socrates, why the same methods should not succeed in establishing similar irrefutable laws in the realm of human affairs. With the new methods discovered by natural science, order could be introduced into the social sphere as well – uniformities could be observed, hypotheses formulated and tested by experiment; laws could be based on them, and then laws in specific regions of experience could be seen to be entailed by wider laws; and these in turn to be entailed by still wider laws, and so on upwards, until a great harmonious system, connected by unbreakable logical links and capable of being formulated in precise – that is, mathematical – terms, could be established.

The rational reorganisation of society would put an end to spiritual and intellectual confusion, the reign of prejudice and superstition, blind obedience to unexamined dogmas, and the stupidities and cruelties of the oppressive regimes which such intellectual darkness bred and promoted. All that was wanted was the identification of the principal human needs and discovery of the means of satisfying them. This would create the happy, free, just, virtuous, harmonious world which Condorcet so movingly predicted in his prison cell in 1794. This view lay at the basis of all progressive thought in the nineteenth century, and was at the heart of much of the critical empiricism which I imbibed in Oxford as a student.

## III

At some point I realised that what all these views had in common was a Platonic ideal: in the first place that, as in the sciences, all genuine questions must have one true answer and one only, all the rest being necessarily errors; in the second place that there must be a dependable path towards the discovery of these truths; in the third place that the true answers, when found, must necessarily be compatible with one another and form a single whole, for one truth cannot be incompatible with another – that we knew *a priori*. This kind of omniscience was the solution of the cosmic jigsaw puzzle. In the case of morals, we could then conceive what the perfect life must be, founded as it would be on a correct understanding of the rules that governed the universe.

True, we might never get to this condition of perfect knowledge – we may be too feeble-witted, or too weak or corrupt or sinful, to achieve this. The obstacles, both intellectual and those of external nature, may be too many. Moreover, opinions, as I say, had widely differed about the right path to pursue – some found it in Churches, some in laboratories; some believed in intuition, others in experiment, or in mystical visions, or in mathematical calculation. But even if we could not ourselves reach these true answers, or indeed, the final system that interweaves them all, the answers must exist – else the questions were not real. The answers must be known to someone: perhaps Adam in Paradise knew; perhaps we shall only reach them at the end of days; if men cannot know them, perhaps the angels know; and if not the angels, then God knows. The timeless truths must in principle be knowable.

Some nineteenth-century thinkers – Hegel, Marx – thought it was not quite so simple. There were no timeless truths. There was historical development, continuous change; human horizons altered with each new step in the evolutionary ladder; history



was a drama with many acts; it was moved by conflicts of forces, sometimes called dialectical, in the realms of both ideas and reality – conflicts which took the form of wars, revolutions, violent upheavals of nations, classes, cultures, movements. Yet after inevitable setbacks, failures, relapses, returns to barbarism, Condorcet's dream would come true. The drama would have a happy ending – man's reason had achieved triumphs in the past, it could not be held back for ever. Men would no longer be victims of nature or of their own largely irrational societies: reason would triumph; universal harmonious co-operation, true history, would at last begin.

For if this was not so, do the ideas of progress, of history, have any meaning? Is there not a movement, however tortuous, from ignorance to knowledge, from mythical thought and childish fantasies to perception of reality face to face, to knowledge of true goals, true values as well as truths of fact? Can history be a mere purposeless succession of events, caused by a mixture of material factors and the play of random selection, a tale full of sound and fury signifying nothing? This was unthinkable. The day would dawn when men and women would take their lives in their own hands and not be self-seeking beings or the playthings of blind forces that they did not understand. It was, at the very least, not impossible to conceive what such an earthly paradise could be; and if it was conceivable, we could, at any rate, try to march towards it. That has been at the centre of ethical thought from the Greeks to the Christian visionaries of the Middle Ages, from the Renaissance to progressive thought in the last century; and, indeed, is believed by many to this day.

#### IV

At a certain stage in my reading, I naturally met with the principal works of Machiavelli. They made a deep and lasting impression

upon me, and shook my earlier faith. I derived from them not the most obvious teachings – on how to acquire and retain political power, or by what force or guile rulers must act if they are to regenerate their societies, or protect themselves and their States from enemies within or without, or what the principal qualities of rulers on the one hand, and of citizens on the other, must be, if their States are to flourish – but something else. Machiavelli was not a historicist: he thought it possible to restore something like the Roman Republic or Rome of the early Principate. He believed that to do this one needed a ruling class of brave, resourceful, intelligent, gifted men who knew how to seize opportunities and use them, and citizens who were adequately protected, patriotic, proud of their State, epitomes of manly, pagan virtues. That is how Rome rose to power and conquered the world, and it is the absence of this kind of wisdom and vitality and courage in adversity, of the qualities of both lions and foxes, that in the end brought it down. Decadent States were conquered by vigorous invaders who retained these virtues.

But Machiavelli also sets side by side with this the notion of Christian virtues – humility, acceptance of suffering, unworldliness, the hope of salvation in an afterlife – and he remarks that if, as he plainly himself favours, a State of a Roman type is to be established, these qualities will not promote it: those who live by the precepts of Christian morality are bound to be trampled on by the ruthless pursuit of power on the part of men who alone can re-create and dominate the republic which he wants to see. He does not condemn Christian virtues. He merely points out that the two moralities are incompatible, and he does not recognise an overarching criterion whereby we are enabled to decide the right life for men. The combination of *virtù* and Christian values is for him an impossibility. He simply leaves you to choose – he knows which he himself prefers.

The idea that this planted in my mind was the realisation, which came as something of a shock, that not all the supreme

values pursued by mankind now and in the past were necessarily compatible with one another. It undermined my earlier assumption, based on the *philosophia perennis*, that there could be no conflict between true ends, true answers to the central problems of life.

Then I came across Giambattista Vico's *Scienza nuova*. Scarcely anyone in Oxford had then heard of Vico, but there was one philosopher, Robin Collingwood, who had translated Croce's book on Vico, and he urged me to read it. This opened my eyes to something new. Vico seemed to be concerned with the succession of human cultures – every society had, for him, its own vision of reality, of the world in which it lived, and of itself and of its relations to its own past, to nature, to what it strove for. This vision of a society is conveyed by everything that its members do and think and feel – expressed and embodied in the kinds of words, the forms of language that they use, the images, the metaphors, the forms of worship, the institutions that they generate, which embody and convey their image of reality and of their place in it; by which they live. These visions differ with each successive social whole – each has its own gifts, values, modes of creation, incommensurable with one another: each must be understood in its own terms – understood, not necessarily evaluated.

The Homeric Greeks, the master class, Vico tells us, were cruel, barbarous, mean, oppressive to the weak; but they created the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, something we cannot do in our more enlightened day. Their great creative masterpieces belong to them, and once the vision of the world changes, the possibility of that type of creation disappears also. We, for our part, have our sciences, our thinkers, our poets, but there is no ladder of ascent from the ancients to the moderns. If this is so, it must be absurd to say that Racine is a better poet than Sophocles, that Bach is a rudimentary Beethoven, that, let us say, the Impressionist painters are the peak which the painters of Florence aspired to but did not reach. The values of these cultures are different, and

they are not necessarily compatible with one another. Voltaire, who thought that the values and ideals of the enlightened exceptions in a sea of darkness – of classical Athens, of Florence of the Renaissance, of France in the *grand siècle* and of his own time – were almost identical, was mistaken.<sup>1</sup> Machiavelli's Rome did not, in fact, exist. For Vico there is a plurality of civilisations (repetitive cycles of them, but that is unimportant), each with its own unique pattern. Machiavelli conveyed the idea of two incompatible outlooks; and here were societies the cultures of which were shaped by values, not means to ends but ultimate ends, ends in themselves, which differed, not in all respects – for they were all human – but in some profound, irreconcilable ways, not combinable in any final synthesis.

After this I naturally turned to the German eighteenth-century thinker Johann Gottfried Herder. Vico thought of a succession of civilisations, Herder went further and compared national cultures in many lands and periods, and held that every society had what he called its own centre of gravity, which differed from that of others. If, as he wished, we are to understand Scandinavian sagas or the poetry of the Bible, we must not apply to them the aesthetic criteria of the critics of eighteenth-century Paris. The ways in which men live, think, feel, speak to one another, the clothes they wear, the songs they sing, the gods they worship, the food they eat, the assumptions, customs, habits which are intrinsic to them – it is these that create communities, each of which has its own 'lifestyle'. Communities may resemble each other in many respects, but the Greeks differ from Lutheran Germans, the Chinese differ from both; what they strive after and what they fear or worship are scarcely ever similar.

<sup>1</sup> Voltaire's conception of enlightenment as being identical in essentials wherever it is attained seems to lead to the inescapable conclusion that, in his view, Byron would have been happy at table with Confucius, and Sophocles would have felt completely at ease in quattrocento Florence, and Seneca in the salon of Madame du Deffand or at the court of Frederick the Great.

This view has been called cultural or moral relativism – this is what that great scholar, my friend Arnaldo Momigliano, whom I greatly admired, supposed both about Vico and about Herder. He was mistaken. It is not relativism. Members of one culture can, by the force of imaginative insight, understand (what Vico called *entrare*) the values, the ideals, the forms of life of another culture or society, even those remote in time or space. They may find these values unacceptable, but if they open their minds sufficiently they can grasp how one might be a full human being, with whom one could communicate, and at the same time live in the light of values widely different from one's own, but which nevertheless one can see to be values, ends of life, by the realisation of which men could be fulfilled.

'I prefer coffee, you prefer champagne. We have different tastes. There is no more to be said.' That is relativism. But Herder's view, and Vico's, is not that: it is what I should describe as pluralism – that is, the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathising and deriving light from each other, as we derive it from reading Plato or the novels of medieval Japan – worlds, outlooks, very remote from our own. Of course, if we did not have any values in common with these distant figures, each civilisation would be enclosed in its own impenetrable bubble, and we could not understand them at all; this is what Spengler's typology amounts to. Intercommunication between cultures in time and space is possible only because what makes men human is common to them, and acts as a bridge between them. But our values are ours, and theirs are theirs. We are free to criticise the values of other cultures, to condemn them, but we cannot pretend not to understand them at all, or to regard them simply as subjective, the products of creatures in different circumstances with different tastes from our own, which do not speak to us at all.

There is a world of objective values. By this I mean those ends

that men pursue for their own sakes, to which other things are means. I am not blind to what the Greeks valued – their values may not be mine, but I can grasp what it would be like to live by their light, I can admire and respect them, and even imagine myself as pursuing them, although I do not – and do not wish to, and perhaps could not if I wished. Forms of life differ. Ends, moral principles, are many. But not infinitely many: they must be within the human horizon. If they are not, then they are outside the human sphere. If I find men who worship trees, not because they are symbols of fertility or because they are divine, with a mysterious life and powers of their own, or because this grove is sacred to Athena – but only because they are made of wood; and if when I ask them why they worship wood they say ‘Because it is wood’ and give no other answer; then I do not know what they mean. If they are human, they are not beings with whom I can communicate – there is a real barrier. They are not human for me. I cannot even call their values subjective if I cannot conceive what it would be like to pursue such a life.

What is clear is that values can clash – that is why civilisations are incompatible. They can be incompatible between cultures, or groups in the same culture, or between you and me. You believe in always telling the truth, no matter what: I do not, because I believe that it can sometimes be too painful and too destructive. We can discuss each other’s point of view, we can try to reach common ground, but in the end what you pursue may not be reconcilable with the ends to which I find that I have dedicated my life. Values may easily clash within the breast of a single individual; and it does not follow that, if they do, some must be true and others false. Justice, rigorous justice, is for some people an absolute value, but it is not compatible with what may be no less ultimate values for them – mercy, compassion – as arises in concrete cases.

Both liberty and equality are among the primary goals pursued by human beings through many centuries; but total liberty