

The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library

CONVERSATIONS FOR TOMORROW

[] = editorial insertion

< > = word(s) spoken, but best omitted

PRIESTLEY ... I was looking this afternoon at some photographs of [pictures by] an artist called Ferro. I don't know him at all and I thought they were pretty bad pictures, but what fascinated me was that these were pictures of half human beings, half machines. I don't know whether they were just a gimmick, or whether he was really dredging them out of his unconscious, but they fascinated me, not as pictures but as evidence of something that I am beginning to worry about, and that is the question of these machines; because either the potentialities are much smaller than they pretend they are – they really can't take them very much further – or it seems to me that, if we accept man as a machine (which I don't), then I think within fifty years we may be dominated and controlled by machines. Have you any views on this?

AYER Well, I suppose we must start from where machines are now, and the sort of way they operate; and if you say 'dominated and controlled', this means that the machines are going to take the decisions, (PRIESTLEY Sure) not merely carry them out. Well now, at present machines can only do things according to rule, according to very complicated rule. There has to be some set of precepts which they can follow, they have to be programmed, and this means that they do anything that can be formalised. Now, I don't think ruling can be formalised, so in a sense machines can't rule us, if you like, because they are too rational, whereas ruling is almost by definition – it's your subject, Isaiah, not mine – ruling is by definition, [according to?] Plato, something irrational.

PRIESTLEY (*to Berlin*) How do you take this?

‘I’M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE’

BERLIN It doesn’t need to be irrational. No, I think that the danger is probably greater than we suppose, that it is more than theoretical. Supposing you have an enormous machine the business of which is to grind out other machines and to give them rules, and these machines then produce other machines which produce smaller rules, and these really grip us in the sense of conditioning us in all kinds of ways. Just think of what machines are already alleged to be able to do. The Russians claim that they can teach people while they are asleep. Well, now imagine this enormously exaggerated, vastly greater than it was.

AYER Yes, but the question is surely ‘What are you going to teach them?’ I mean, if ... I can imagine this: supposing you and I, Mr Priestley, decide that a certain form of life is the right type of life for man, that is to say, utilitarianism, the pursuit of happiness, but it now has to be defined fairly concretely; one has to tell the machine what happiness consists in, in what fields – get this information – then of course it can take decisions, it then can tell us ‘Well, if you act in this way and that way and the other way you will get more happiness than doing it in a different fashion.’ But this would be only useful, this would be to be welcomed. If we make the ultimate decisions, I’m all for having machines simplify the donkey-work.

BERLIN Well, all very well about simplifying the donkey work, but, I mean, it goes too far. The machine won’t make a mistake and if you suddenly think something has gone slightly wrong in the beginning it will get wronger and wronger as the two million machines [create?] disorder, just as it does in the common bureaucracy now, except that it will be incorrigible.

PRIESTLEY Well, I think this – I really think this could happen. In other words the machines could function on a much lower level than you are speaking about, once they became independent, and I am not now talking about machines as they are, I am talking about the machines that the people who make machines promise we shall have.

‘I’M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE’

AYER Well now, what kind of fantasy is this? One imagines some machine originally set up by the three of us, shall we say, in an extremely high-minded way; and then this machine itself issues orders to policeman machines which are somehow mechanically reproduced; and then our very careful blueprints go wrong in some way and there is no means of correcting this. This is perfectly true, but how different is this from human beings, after all? Isn’t this a perfectly good description of a good deal that happens in a good many places, perhaps not so many miles from here?

PRIESTLEY Well, I did put this in as a small clause, that if we believe we are machines then I think we may soon be – I mean, in fifty or a hundred years – controlled by machines. I happen not to think – I think we aren’t machines, but ...

AYER Well now, could you elucidate this? I mean, when you say we are not machines, what are you claiming for us? Where does the point of demarcation come?

PRIESTLEY I think it comes from – I am sorry to say this, you will hate it – what I would call an X-factor. I don’t know what this factor is, frankly.

AYER There’s nothing for me to hate or not to hate yet. I mean, give a value to your variable.

PRIESTLEY All right, let’s take an example of what I mean. Here is Mozart. Mozart is produced by heredity, environment, genes, chromosomes and so on – but to me Mozart is produced by heredity, environment and an X-factor. I don’t know what this is, but I am sure it exists.

AYER Well now ...

PRIESTLEY Do you repudiate this?

AYER It is very difficult for me to repudiate it because it is so vague, but what you might be saying is that it would be impossible so to discover what went to make Mozart that one could, as it

‘I’M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE’

were, reproduce it – there would be no way of training or drugging an infant so that he would become Mozart – that somehow the evolution of human beings is something in principle unpredictable. Would you agree with this, Shaya?

PRIESTLEY Well I was going to – you took the very words, because I was going to say ...

BERLIN Yes, but unpredictability in itself isn’t going to be enough, is it? Just sheer randomness isn’t what we asked for. What I want to know is this: when you said a moment ago that there were cultures not so very far away from here which are mechanical enough to be rather like the sorts of things that machines might do, you obviously said it with a certain disfavour towards that kind of thing ... you said it with a certain [dis?]approval. Why? I mean, this seems a very naïve question. Supposing I painted before you a sort of Utopia in which machines brought us up, conditioned us, taught us while we were asleep, told us what to eat, what to drink, stopped our anti-social activities, weren’t at all brutal or cruel, and produced an absolutely smooth-functioning, not unhappy race of human beings meshing with each other in perfect harmony and peace, and supposing I said to you in advance that these people wouldn’t suffer from anxieties, they wouldn’t suffer from frightfully divided counsel as we do, they wouldn’t have temptations, they wouldn’t have any aggressive instincts, they’d tick over in a perfectly smooth way, what is horrifying about this?

AYER Well, there are two questions here ... What is horrifying is not that it’s done by machines, but that it’s done at all.

BERLIN Oh, of course, yes; no, but supposing there were a race of beings who were like that, even if it hadn’t been done by machines, or by anyone. You would just see a sort of lonely valley in which you would suddenly discover those absolutely frictionless creatures.

AYER Well I’m not sure that it does totally horrify me but let me first hear why it horrifies you.

BERLIN I know why it horrifies me, I think, yes ...

‘I’M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE’

PRIESTLEY Well, no, I was going to say that why Utopias always depress me – as I think they do most people – is the thing is finished, but I believe that man is happiest when he is creating; I mean, to create a Utopia – but merely to enjoy, to be in the consumer attitude, is no good at all.

AYER Ah, but this, if I may say so, is cheating, because this is going to be so splendidly organised that men will create too. I mean, this is only, after all, the old *Brave New World* thing. Here we have these ...

PRIESTLEY But they didn’t create anything ... They consumed, they enjoyed, they didn’t create ...

AYER I mean, we have this supply of drugs and we divide the persons up. We’d calculate what percentage are going to be allowed to do creative work. We’d feed them the appropriate drug and out come our little Mozarts. Now so long as your Mozarts do come, do you mind? I mean, you might say one can’t produce Mozarts in this way – this is your view – but I think Shaya’s view is that even if one could there would be something horrifying about their being produced in this way ...

BERLIN I’d have to say they weren’t Mozarts ... You said this was cheating ...

AYER It was cheating ...

BERLIN No, but look, let me give you an example of what I mean. It’s exactly the same question as if one were to say this. Take the utilitarian position, you say. You want happiness, OK, we can produce it for you. Here is a pill. If you take this pill, the one thing I can guarantee, you will never have twinges of conscience again, never. It will be removed from you as a headache is today. You will never mind anything you have done; you will always be in an equable state of mind; even if you perform acts which are regarded as horrifying, you will never be pursued by your own conscience, and nobody will ever know that you have done them. This is the old Platonic myth of the ring of Gyges – getting away,

‘I’M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE’

so to speak. What would induce anyone to refuse that? I think we all should, in fact. If I offered you this pill you wouldn’t swallow it, would you?

AYER Ah yes, obviously not, because we already have certain moral standards acquired in one way or another; I mean, because we are in fact not utilitarians – I don’t think anybody is really utilitarian, one doesn’t, certainly not – well, this is not even utilitarianism, this is a kind of egotistic hedonism. You are now – the ring of Gyges is saying, if I can get away with murder and have no conscience, why shouldn’t I? Well, I am already conditioned not to approve of this sort of thing.

BERLIN Yes, but lots of other people would take these pills as well. It wouldn’t just apply to you, of course.

AYER If this is to be a society where we are all happy ...

BERLIN All right, why aren’t we utilitarians? This is a perfectly reasonable question in this context. Because, you see, the machines might conceivably produce a utilitarian ideal. That isn’t what they won’t produce. If you say, ‘Why machines?’, well, to remove pain – they’re labour-saving devices, they’re pain-killing devices, all this is very good. They remove a lot of horrible labour which people are at the present moment doing. They prevent exploitation. There’s a great deal of good in machines, but if you push them beyond a certain point, if you say, ‘You know, everything will be done by machines in future, really there will be absolutely nothing to do. In fact, we shall ourselves be conditioned by them.’ What sends a cold chill ...

AYER Because we somehow feel, and this needs analysing – and I’m not sure I know how to analyse it – we somehow feel this is an affront to our dignity. We somehow feel that it’s preferable to make our own mistakes, even to muddle things and be unhappy – rather than have everything arranged for us. (BERLIN Hear, hear.) We have a view of freedom, but now what exactly does it imply?

PRIESTLEY But isn’t this terribly negative? That you mustn’t have pain, you mustn’t have anxiety, you mustn’t have this. But I

'I'M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE'

don't think one minds these things. It depends what you're doing. (BERLIN Surely.) I mean, it's this terrible negative ...

BERLIN Sure, but I think what Freddie says comes to the same, which is a question of freedom. You want to feel free to make mistakes. You think it's better to be free to make mistakes than not to be free and – than [not] to make mistakes at the cost of losing freedom, to be free from making any mistakes, to make no mistakes, to be infallible, but unfree.

AYER This is certainly what I emotionally feel.

BERLIN Now what is this freedom?

AYER Exactly. How does it stand up intellectually? You see, it certainly doesn't mean acting entirely spontaneously, because none of us does this. I mean, we are after all the products of our education, of all the stimuli we've had, of all the people who have said things to us, the books we've read and so on, and we recognise all this and don't feel in the least threatened by it. We still take credit for our successes and feel remorse for our misdeeds, shame for our failures and so on. And I wonder, and I'd like to have this refuted, whether there is any difference here between being conditioned in a sort of haphazard way of which we are unaware and being conditioned in a planned way. Well now, why should we think it is perfectly all right to be conditioned in a haphazard inefficient way, even though it makes us less happy, and rebel against being conditioned in a planned efficient way, even though it makes us happier? It seems totally irrational. And yet, I feel this quite as much as you. False antithesis, you think?

BERLIN Yes, I think it's a false antithesis because I think we don't believe that we are wholly conditioned at all, of course.

AYER Then do you take tremendous pride in being a roulette ball in that case?

BERLIN I don't think that's the alternative. I don't think the alternative is between being purely an object of random –

‘I’M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE’

randomly thrown about like a roulette ball, and being conditioned by known causes.

AYER So the alternative is what?

BERLIN The alternative is choice, I have to say – well, choice means we certainly believe there is some sense in [which] we needn’t do what we do do, and ‘needn’t’ doesn’t mean we might have done something different, but for no cause at all. It’s obscure enough, as we all know.

PRIESTLEY But could I put it this way, that we are much more anxious to be ourselves than to be happy?

AYER Oh, surely – I don’t at all ...

BERLIN But being ourselves means being free to act as we want. And the point – what Freddie wants to know is what we mean by ‘free’, and that’s an old philosophical chestnut, which would last all evening, though it’s worth discussing.

AYER Let’s not go perhaps so much into the philosophical side of it, as into the sort of purely practical side at this moment. I mean, there is, it seems to me, a growing body of evidence that one can make people do almost anything if one conditions them, if one subjects them to the right sort of propaganda, or certainly the right physiological stimuli.

PRIESTLEY I would say on the whole – you may disagree with me – but on the whole this has not been as well proved as one would have thought. I personally of course don’t believe that people are born into the world as blank slates on which you can write anything, and on the whole the conditioning, for instance, of the totalitarian countries has been less successful than perhaps twenty or twenty-five years ago we might have said.

BERLIN Yes, I’m sure, certainly, certainly – and they would agree. Certainly, something escapes.

‘I’M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE’

PRIESTLEY I mean, Russia is a very good example – the young generation in Russia, I mean, who’ve been completely conditioned for thirty years ... There must be something, there is something ...

BERLIN Yes, no good, yes, yes, they go on protesting, they go on protesting, they go on protesting, and this of course is rather maddening for the conditioners.

PRIESTLEY As a matter of fact, could we put it like this? That it is in the countries where you don’t think you are being conditioned that the conditioning is most successful – as in America, where everybody is told they are completely free and in point of fact they are being conditioned ...

BERLIN ... far more heavily than we are. Yes, certainly. Let me ask you about propaganda. Now that’s of course a term of abuse, rightly. But now, why do we object to propaganda? If it’s lies, we don’t want to be lied to – all right, I see that – but supposing it isn’t lies in the crude sense, where is the line to be drawn between all this sort of crude advertising, which we rightly protest against, which has now become a great subject, and <between> what is called persuasion? If somebody, I mean, supposing somebody puts great moral pressure on me, supposing somebody comes along to me and says – my mother comes along to me and says, ‘I don’t want you to do this or that, you’ll make me frightfully unhappy if you do.’ This is putting pressure on me, moral pressure of a certain kind. This is different, presumably, at least in my eyes, from what we officially object to, which is being blared at by voices, being shown pictures on walls, being in some way insensibly driven towards committing certain acts [] ...

AYER It’s partly, isn’t it, a question of the motive? When your mother – to use your own example – says to you that she wishes you wouldn’t do such and such, then you think she has a good reason. Either she is thinking of your own interest or she has some moral view that she wishes to enjoin to you. She is in a way disinterested. When we are subjected to what we call propaganda we think this is being put across by people (BERLIN In their own interests) in their own interests. Either they want to sell us things

‘I’M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE’

or they are putting over a view which they think perhaps won’t stand up to rational examination.

BERLIN I think I object more to that. I think I object to being treated like a child. I think I object to not being reasoned with. I object to paternalism, I mean, ultimately, I think, what I object to is being treated like a schoolboy, being told for my own good that there are certain things to do, or being driven in a perfectly beneficent direction by [a] perfectly disinterested, pure-hearted body of – anyone you like, governments or manufacturers – it doesn’t matter which – even if you assume that they are pure-hearted men not seeking profit at all.

AYER You don’t object to political propaganda, I mean, at an election time you don’t ...

BERLIN No, because that’s supposed to be rational. That’s supposed to place argument before me which I can examine and criticise, because my reason is being appealed to – at least, in theory it’s appealed to. Now, what does that come to? That means that it is thought that I am able to decide this way or that way and be my own master, be myself, in fact, whereas in the other case, in the utilitarian case, there would be a very strong case for saying, ‘Look, there isn’t time to appeal to people’s reason. Anyway, we are not so sure that it exists. For God’s sake, in order to stop all the poverty and the misery and the general misfortunes of the world, let us somehow drive them into this pen, even if they don’t want to go. They will be grateful to us later.’ And this, somehow, is of course an insult to our dignity, and exactly what we object to.

PRIESTLEY And you know, the curious thing about propaganda – I don’t know if you have ever noticed this – [is] that it is usually begun quite cynically. ‘We must put this across.’ But it always ends by the people who make the propaganda believing the propaganda, against their own interests. I’ve noticed this over and over and over again.

BERLIN And they are taken in.

‘I’M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE’

PRIESTLEY They are taken in by their own propaganda, which they began by being quite cynical about.

AYER Do you think this is always wrong? I mean supposing – (BERLIN Not always, no) it comes up constantly, doesn’t it? I mean, supposing you have some religious conviction or some political conviction. You think, it’s vitally important for these people’s happiness – I mean, that they should act in a certain way. I just don’t know. I mean, this is the thing: it comes up in Communism, it comes up in Catholicism, it comes up everywhere.

BERLIN But even medically, you see – supposing you want to diminish the number of accidents on the road. If there was some terrific sign on the road which would have a purely sensuous effect, so to speak, [a] subliminal effect on the motorist, and prevent him from doing certain things which I want to prevent him from doing. The fact that he is being got at would be worth – wouldn’t annoy me. I would think it was worth it because of the lives saved.

PRIESTLEY Would you? But that would be propaganda. (BERLIN Yes.) Propaganda is not concerned with the truth at all, it is concerned with the ... (AYER It is concerned with the end.) There is no question about that.

BERLIN Causing people to act in certain ways. (PRIESTLEY I don’t like it.) No, but I see there are situations in which you know, just in the same sort of way, as if you wanted to stop somebody from doing something terrible to themselves, leaping out of a window, you would do anything to stop them, you pull them back, you apply violence – if you can apply violence why not apply propaganda? I don’t want to talk against all propaganda, but what offends us, what I wanted to bring out – what do we hate about propaganda, why not propaganda? I mean ...

AYER No, I think we’ve already hit on it. I think there are these two conflicting values, the value of what’s good for people and the value of their dignity and their choosing what they want even if it’s not good for them.

'I'M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE'

BERLIN Yes, but their dignity consists in what? I want a little more about dignity. What is dignity? What is this human – no doubt this is your factor X.

PRIESTLEY Well, it is certainly, I would have thought, the faculty of reasonable choice (AYER Certainly, yes) which propaganda would never offer you.

BERLIN Being one's own master.

AYER Being accorded the right to decide for oneself.

BERLIN Being one's own master. If I choose to go to the bad I choose it. (AYER, PRIESTLEY Yes.) I would rather have the right to choose to go to the bad than no right to choose at all, even if this makes me happy. Now this is a very deep human desire, certainly, and seems to me to be part of what we mean by human nature. I think anyone who thinks human beings aren't like that is in some way frustrating something very essential to human beings.

AYER Well, wait a moment. This is your subject rather than mine, but is it true that this notion of human beings having a right to decide their own destination is something that's always existed? I should think it's pretty modern and recent.

BERLIN No, the right to decide – well, I think the notion of human beings as rational is older, but I think in the old days we thought that God creat[ed?] human beings for certain purposes, and there was a great pyramid in which everybody performed a certain function; but they didn't perform the function because they were conditioned into it by God or anyone else, (AYER, PRIESTLEY No) but because they understood that this was the right thing to do. They were endowed with reason, which perceived this.

PRIESTLEY Now would you agree, because we ought to look at the future a little, (BERLIN Surely) that this is going – that there is more and more propaganda, (BERLIN Certainly) that people are regarded more and more as raw material. (BERLIN Certainly.) How long this will last I don't know, because ...

'I'M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE'

BERLIN The whole idea of human material, which people talk about, is a sinister phrase.

PRIESTLEY Of course it is, of course it is.

BERLIN Yes, I think that's true.

AYER And yet it's historically quite intelligible, isn't it, I mean, we've long ago given up the idea of the universe being a kind of – or, sorry, the world of man, being a kind of hierarchical system in which each of us has his place, his function and so on; and we've had a couple of hundred years, I suppose, now, anyhow in the Western world, where people are on the whole engaging in a free-for-all, and the devil take the hindmost; and this became a little too painful, and so now you get people – in a sense it's a bold sort of Nietzschean phrase – having to take the place that God once took. We feel, I mean, that this is partly a good thing; out of a sense of responsibility for one another and [the] need to protect the weaker ones comes the idea [that] we must re-establish the sort of sense of community that existed before and broke down. But then, of course, there's a terrible step, that from these rather noble feelings you then get the sense of power, of 'I know better than you do what's good for you', and then all the tyrannical things you're afraid of; and I think that what we want to do in the future – and this is a perhaps rather empty saying – is try and get the best of both worlds. I mean, get – retain the belief in the individual's rights, which is, I think, the best thing in liberalism, but combine it with a sense of community.

PRIESTLEY I wonder whether you would agree that as men get further and further from a sensuous enjoyment of life the idea of power appeals to them more and more.

BERLIN Oh, that's very interesting. Now, in what sort of way? You mean because they are divided from nature, because they live in factories, because they live in towns – that sense of sensuous?

PRIESTLEY Yes – not necessarily in factories or towns, but as they are cut off more and more from the sensuous appreciation of

‘I’M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE’

natural life, then they concentrate more and more on power; but I regard power as a substitute thing in many ways, a substitute ...

BERLIN There’s always been pretty much the scramble for power, even in the sensuous days, if you know what I mean, even in the sort of agricultural days of Rome.

AYER Yes, I rather doubt the premise, even, whether men are now, or are likely to become, more cut off from sensuous life. I mean, certainly we live a more urban rather than agricultural life, but I doubt whether ...

BERLIN It’s a psychological hypothesis – I wouldn’t know enough. You may be right, I wouldn’t know. I just want to say, about what Freddie said, this: I think that’s right, I think if you remove the sense of objective hierarchy in life in which everybody has a certain function in the medieval sense, or even the Greek sense, people become disintegrated – this is a platitude – and then in the future there is a great desire to bring them together again. Now the danger is this, not only that these men who herd us, the shepherds – but also how to do it quickly enough to prevent people from destroying each other; and then people say, ‘I’m very sorry, we haven’t got time to do it by kindness, by reasoning, by persuading these people. Human beings are children. We must first herd them together, create certain institutions, make them obey orders, and we hope later they will see how well we’ve done for them, and they will become rational in the course of ...’. This is exactly what the British Empire felt towards coloured people in Africa, it’s exactly what schoolmasters feel towards children, and it always leads to bad consequences in the end. It’s quite honourable.

AYER And the opposite extreme is just as bad, you see ...

BERLIN And the opposite extreme is – to let people do what they like means there is chaos and destruction.

AYER And yes, they terribly oppress each other. Now it shouldn’t be impossible to reconcile these two. You think it’s going, don’t you, Priestley, far too far the other way. You think we are in danger of being totally regimented.

‘I’M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE’

PRIESTLEY Yes, I do. I do indeed – indeed, by machines, to come back to where we started ...

AYER Well, I don’t think by machines, I mean possibly this may be the – you mean, by men who in your eyes don’t differ from machines.

PRIESTLEY Well, no, and the more we ...

BERLIN No, you mean literally by machines?

PRIESTLEY Well, literally, indeed, by machines, because – they will be cleverer machines than we are. If we are machines then we will make, and indeed some of the chaps say they are already making, much cleverer machines.

BERLIN Chess-players who play better chess than chess masters do now.

PRIESTLEY Sure.

AYER Well, I must say if I am going to be regimented I would just as soon it were by a machine, I think, I mean ...

BERLIN Less resentment, you think ...

AYER Yes, and unlikely to be a sadist; I mean, probably a mechanical housemaster would have been better than the housemaster I actually had.

PRIESTLEY But why shouldn’t you be – why shouldn’t you be regimented? I see no reason why you shouldn’t be – I mean, I can’t be, I think Shaya can’t, but why shouldn’t you ...

AYER You mean, just, I could be more easily than either of you? (PRIESTLEY I’m being unpleasant ... not really. BERLIN We’re ganging up on you. You seem to mind it less. You say ...) Why shouldn’t you? Again this is ambiguous, because it might be easier

‘I’M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE’

to regiment me, or you mean why should I have any moral objection to it?

PRIESTLEY You are with a regimentation, then ...

BERLIN I think it’s no good, I think I’m going to produce a series of platitudes now. I think we’ve got to assume people are rational. We’ve got to assume that people can understand what we say, we must assume education works better than regimentation. We must assume that it takes longer, and it’s more painful, it’s still worth doing, that it’s no good having dictatorships as intermediate steps to lead to freedom, no good because if this isn’t true, if in fact human beings are far less rational than we think, if all these things [are true?], then it’s no good doing anything anyway. It doesn’t matter. We must assume the optimistic alternative.

PRIESTLEY I’m a mild optimist with a pessimistic outlook.

BERLIN But we have no alternative, because if we assume the pessimistic alternative it doesn’t frightfully matter from the very large perspective. *We* may escape ...

PRIESTLEY I’m not sure. I don’t think people are rational like that.

BERLIN They are rational enough.

PRIESTLEY Are you rational?

BERLIN Not in – awful thing to say. You know, I look at the Scandinavians – it may be a little dull to be like that – but it’s a great deal better to be like that than to be like some other peoples whom I won’t mention.

PRIESTLEY I don’t know: the suicide rate is very high ... (BERLIN Boredom, that comes ...) well, yes, from boredom in that country, I suppose, and this is a very dangerous thing.

AYER I think people are fairly rational.

‘I’M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE’

BERLIN Now, would you rather have a society in which there were quite a lot of suicides or a society which is like an army – very few suicides, frightfully regimented, quite happy and on the whole mechanical.

AYER Of course, I would have thought everybody would choose the society with quite a lot – I don’t think the fact of a high suicide rate is particularly alarming. I mean, a high suicide rate doesn’t mean a very very great percentage. It means a lot of people are bored; it means that they are not restrained by any scruples from killing themselves when they feel that life is not worth living, which is on the whole a good thing rather than a bad thing. I’d sooner someone committed suicide – it’s a form of freedom – than dragged out a miserable life to himself and others.

PRIESTLEY Yes, I think the argument there is: why do these particular people think life not worth living when they have got most of the things that other people have been fighting for?

BERLIN It’s like the angry young men, isn’t it, I mean that’s what happened ...

PRIESTLEY Certainly at one time – if you talked about angry *old* men, you’d get somewhere ...

AYER It partly also comes from their having a higher standard of what they expect from life. I mean, the curious thing is in countries where people live very, very miserable lives indeed, where their lives really are obviously nasty, brutish, short and the rest of it, there are rather few suicides, because they don’t expect anything very much.

BERLIN And also there are very few alternatives, you see. They are so driven, so terribly from pillar to post, there’s no time to think about what to do. What suicide comes from, I suspect (though I’m a pure amateur in these matters), is from having too many alternatives which you can’t choose among.

AYER And expecting a great deal of life.

‘I’M GOING TO TAMPER WITH YOUR BELIEFS A LITTLE’

BERLIN And expecting a great deal, you don’t know which to do, and so they all appear equally stale, equally unprofitable. Very few suicides, I suspect, in armies, or in totalitarian States.

PRIESTLEY You’re making them more rational than they are. You know, I think that suicides come from a desire to destruct ...

BERLIN Just sheer destruction. Maybe you are right ...

BERLIN But we are thinking: why are these very cultivated, these very freedom-loving, these civilised communities – why are they prone?

PRIESTLEY I think they are bored. I think they are bored and I think this is one great danger of our whole civilisation, a kind of anaesthesia, that people are going to get awfully bored. I mean, in twenty years from now, when ...

© *The Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust 2006*

Posted 1 March 2006