

THE ASSAULT ON THE
FRENCH ENLIGHTENMENT

2 *Kant and Individual Autonomy*

This is a lightly edited transcript of a text of a lecture in Isaiah Berlin's papers. No attempt has been made to bring it to a fully publishable form, but this version is posted here for the convenience of scholars.

I TURN NOW to a very different approach – by the philosopher Kant and his pupil Schiller. Kant, I should add, regarded Herder's views with undisguised contempt, and was paid in exactly the same coin by Herder.

To talk about Kant in connection with the assault on the Enlightenment may seem extremely paradoxical, because Kant, rightly, is thought to be a hyper-rationalist sort of figure, dedicated to precision of thought, rigour, logic, minute and severe argument, and an enemy of everything that is vague, misty, confused and, above all, romantic. Kant himself detested even such romanticism as occurred towards the end of the eighteenth century. He reserved some of his sternest words of disapproval for various persons whom he regarded as [muddled?]¹ – people with some kind of confused, enthusiastic longing for the infinite, and so forth. Because he was a man of rigour of thought, and dedicated to the defence and explanation of the natural sciences, on which he was a great expert, being a considerable cosmologist himself, and an analyst of unsurpassed acuteness and importance, there is something rather paradoxical about putting him in this particular *galère*. Nevertheless, I hope I shall make good the claim that I wish to make.

Kant, of course, is the greatest figure in modern philosophy – I do not wish to enlarge on that. He was the first person, perhaps, to state quite clearly what the true subject-matter of philosophy is,

¹ [Word omitted.]

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

and to distinguish it both from the sciences on the one hand and from logic and mathematics on the other, and certainly from the ordinary ideas of common sense. But this is not the aspect of him on which I propose to dwell. I propose to dwell on his moral philosophy; but not really on the whole of that, only on those aspects of it which contributed to the huge revolution with which I am concerned.

Kant did, of course, accept the triumph of the sciences completely. He dedicated himself to an analysis of why the findings of science are certain and to be believed, against the attacks upon this very view of, for example, Hume, who thought the premisses upon which the sciences rested were mere undemonstrable beliefs. And, to repeat, he had a peculiar loathing of everything which is a cult, everything which is irrational. And although normally one thinks of the eighteenth century as a century of reason, a century of rationalism, a century of elegance and symmetry, underneath this glossy surface, which is usually presented to us by the historians of taste, the historians of art, and, indeed, some historians of thought also, there was a great deal that was turbulent, confused, occult and violent. In the second half of the eighteenth century there began to wander, particularly through eastern Europe but through parts of western Europe as well, all kinds of mystagogues, all kinds of preachers, all kinds of messiahs, with and without beards, all kinds of persons who represented themselves as Christs on earth of various sorts. Some of them were rather harmless, others committed crimes. This is the century of Mesmer, the century of Cagliostro, the century in which there were all sorts of table-turning by distinguished people – by the king of Sweden, and the king of Denmark, and the Duchess of Devonshire, and the vicomte de Rohan. It was not as smooth and as quiet and as symmetrical as all that.

Why did this happen? In part it was because whenever public thought takes on too severely rational, almost pedantically rational, a turn, the darker forces, the unconscious forces which undoubtedly stir through the minds of mankind, seek some kind of outlet and break out in all kinds of fashions. This is certainly what happened in ancient Greece. The rationalist philosopher Aristotle, the rationalist philosophy of the Stoics were more or less simultaneous with all kinds of mystery cults, all kinds of searches for the irrational, of the darkest and most mysterious kind. This began happening, too, towards the end of the eighteenth century.

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

For example, the rise of Swedenborg and the Swedenborgian religion is a typical symptom of the outbreak of what might be called unconscious and irrational forces against the excessive tyranny of scientific rationalism.

Kant hated all this, tried to refute it, attacked it. Why, then, should I regard him as being responsible for some of these things? While he was, of course, as I say, a rigorous rationalist and believed in the findings of the sciences, this is only one aspect of him. There was something schizophrenic, as it were, about him as a thinker, because in the realm of moral philosophy he was, like Herder, brought up by the pietists. Pietists in Germany[, as I have said,] were a sect of Protestants driven in upon themselves by the humiliations and the provincialism of Germany, who believed in the inner light, who above all believed in constant soul-searching, constant searching of one's own conscience, in absolute dedication to the constant reading of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, constant self-questioning of their own motives. They disbelieved in ritual, they were not interested in learning; they were mainly interested in distinguishing right from wrong, in living upright lives; they were weighed down by a sense of sin, by the sense of corruption which goes through everything human, which they largely derived from the preachings of Luther and his followers. This led, no doubt, to a great deal of hypocrisy, but it led also to a great deal of severe discipline and lucidity and clarity of thought. Both Herder and Kant, although they disagreed with each other, were disciples of these men.

Kant disliked Herder because he thought his generalisations were too large and too vague. He disliked him because he thought that all these huge historical generalisations were not founded on enough evidence, that his method was not scrupulous enough. He also disliked Herder because he thought Herder paid too little attention to logic, to reasoning, that both his style and his outlook were too turbid, too turbulent – no doubt interesting and suggestive, but philosophically much too confused ever to be useful in the rational progress of mankind.

Herder, on the other hand, did not like Kant because he thought he was too pedantic, too severe, because he divided everything into categories, because he distinguished between reason and imagination, imagination and understanding, understanding and intuition, intuition and perception, perception and sensation. All these things for Herder were artificial divisions

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

made by a lot of dry pedants: man was one, his body and his soul were one, imagination overflowed into reason, reason into intuition, intuition into perception. These artificial barriers inside human beings, just like the artificial barriers inside society, were simply instituted by a lot of dry-souled pedants who did not understand the unity either of men or of groups or of nations. In short, Kant and Herder had no sympathy with each other, and they wrote extremely disagreeable reviews of each other's works.

They were, roughly speaking, contemporaries: they were born and died within a few years of each other. They both came from East Prussia – from Königsberg, which was, no doubt, the absolute seat or heart of the pietist doctrine. And both revolted against certain aspects of the Enlightenment. As I have mentioned, this was a very backward part of Germany, and the sudden introduction by Frederick the Great, who was a French-speaking enlightened despot, of a lot of cold and contemptuous French officials who spoke French and looked down upon these poor German 'hicks' as a lot of totally uneducated countrymen, totally unable to understand either how to conduct life or any of the new arts and sciences of which France was proud, produced a natural revolt on the part of these unfortunate people, and a good deal of fairly acute xenophobia, to which Herder gave himself with enthusiasm, while Kant, in his more modest way, tried to resist it and tried to find everything that was good in it. But it affected both men.

To return to Kant's pietist upbringing: one of the great principles of pietism was the view that man can choose between right and wrong, and that he chooses between them freely, and is meritorious only if he makes the right kind of choice. The pietists were not interested in good and evil for their own sake – at least not so much. If good was to be defined in terms of what human beings desired or what made human beings happy, which was the general view of the eighteenth century, then happiness was the last goal for which they were seeking. Man was not here for happiness: this was a vale of tears; he was oppressed, in any case, by a thousand ills; so all he could do was to save his soul by following his conscience in all circumstances and resisting evil, no matter how great the pressure put upon him either by men or by circumstances.

This Kant imbibed from his teacher Martin Knutzen, and believed all his life. Consequently, morality was something in

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

which he believed very firmly. He argued that if man was to be moral – that is to say, if he was to be praised and blamed, praised for his right acts and blamed for his wrong acts – the implication of this was that he could choose between them. Only if he could choose could he be regarded as responsible for them. Responsibility therefore implies freedom of choice. If I choose to do what I do, not because I am free to choose between them, but because I am conditioned to do so, by whatever it may be – by education, by my passions, by the behaviour of my body, by the pressure upon me of my society, by any kind of force, whether the external forces of nature or the forces of nurture or education or, as I say, my own emotions – if I am in fact conditioned, if I am simply an object in nature like stones and animals, who cannot help acting as they do, so that some men are generous because they cannot help being generous and others are mean because they cannot help being mean, how then can praise and blame be rationally used?

Yet one of the things Kant believed most fervently was that the one thing which all men could do was to choose between right and wrong. He had begun by thinking that moral choices were dictated by some degree of expertise, that, as in chemistry, as in physics, as in mathematics, you had to have a certain degree of education, or knowledge, in order to be able to choose what was right as distinct from what was wrong, what was your duty as distinct from what was not. But on reading Rousseau's *Émile*, which was the one work by Rousseau that made a profound impression upon him – much more than *The Social Contract* – and which, we are told, was the only thing that ever made him miss his daily walk to his lecture, so that he was positively late (an unheard-of thing in Königsberg, because it was well known that the citizens of Königsberg set their watches by Kant's daily, methodical walk to his lectures), he was convinced by Rousseau that in moral matters all men are experts. There is no need for expertise; no man, if he is sane at all, ignores the difference between right and wrong – he may be mistaken about what he thinks right, and he may be mistaken about what he thinks wrong, but he knows the difference. If a man suddenly says to you, 'I used to know the difference between right and wrong, but I am afraid I have forgotten it', it is not very likely that you will believe him. And this was the proposition which Kant accepted wholeheartedly.

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

If this was so, if all men could do this, and if you discovered a man of whom you could say that he did not know the difference between right and wrong, you rightly judged him to be in some way not quite sane, not responsible for his acts, and you would be liable to send him to the hospital rather than to prison for what he did. If this was so, then surely it followed, for Kant, that men, however hemmed in they might be by this or that causal factor, must at least have a limited degree of freedom, at least to be able to choose what is right, or at least to refrain from choosing what is wrong. This seems simple enough, but all kinds of revolutionary consequences followed.

How can I be free? I cannot control the external world: the external world rolls on its way whatever I may do – I have very little power over that. I cannot even control the acts of other men. What can I control? I cannot be responsible for being happy. Whether I am happy or not does not lie in my power, but in the power of a great many factors over which I plainly have no control. What, again, is the inner self which the tyrant cannot touch, which circumstances cannot break? There must be some inner light within me which is free from interference; this inner light guides me to the difference between right and wrong, and it can in all circumstances be followed.

This entails that only those acts are moral which proceed from me, of which I am the author, which I choose, and not those acts in respect of which I am chosen for, which other men choose me for or which circumstances choose me for – that which I initiate, of which I am the author, not something which conditions me, which guides me. Therefore the whole French view, mainly of the Encyclopaedists, that men are as they are because of the particular flesh and blood and bone and tissue of which they are made, because they live in the periods in which they do, are brought up in the places in which they are, because of the influence of climate, of geography, of economic factors, of social and educational factors – all these things which shape me as I am must be ignored in order to make room for that particle of freedom, that small space within which I am able freely to choose. I must be the author of my acts.

If I am as totally conditioned as Helvétius thought me to be, or as Holbach thought me to be, or as a good many of the other French Encyclopaedists, under the influence of the new natural sciences, thought me to be, in what sense can I be said to be able

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

to act at all, rather than to be acted upon? Godwin, somewhat later, said that man is no more responsible for murder than the knife which he uses; he is just as conditioned by nature to do what he does as the knife in his hand is conditioned to do what it does by the impulsion of the wrist.

This is something which Kant plainly found unacceptable. The notion that human beings are in that sense robots, in that sense objects, playthings of forces outside them, he refuted by the direct moral evidence of the notions of right and wrong, by the fact that every man knew, in choosing, that this was a primary datum. This could not be an illusion any more than the perception of the external world could be a total illusion. It was just as primary a datum, and needed to be reckoned with. But clearly this was not totally compatible with the scientific doctrines which the French Encyclopaedists were preaching, according to which men were just as determined, just as conditioned, as everything else in a causally determined nature.

The first freedom which Kant talks about is freedom from men. There is a little essay by him called ‘Was ist Aufklärung?’, or ‘What is Enlightenment?’, in which he makes his point very clear. He speaks of human autonomy – that is to say, being conditioned by myself, being the author of my own acts, in fact the very notion of action as something which is different from mere behaviour. If somebody pushes my elbow, I am behaving; if I act, if I choose – and all men are choosers, and that is how they differ from the rest of nature – then I am autonomous. If whatever is in me is not under my control – my digestive system, the circulation of my blood, and various other things which affect my body in a way which I cannot altogether control, that is called heteronomy, that is to say, being conditioned by causal factors outside me.

If I am made to do what I do by somebody else, no matter how well-intentioned, this is to deprive me of some primary human quality and is a form of oppression, of humiliation, of degradation. There are all kinds of things which Kant disliked very much: he disliked cruelty, he disliked ignorance, he disliked indolence, he disliked many things which the Enlightenment preached against, he disliked superstition, he disliked prejudice – all these things he disliked with just as much fervour as the most illuminated and the most enlightened of the French *philosophes*. But there is something which he disliked even more, and that is the notion of paternalism. ‘A paternalist government’, he said, ‘based on the benevolence of a

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

ruler who treats his subjects as un-grown-up children is the greatest conceivable despotism, and destroys all freedom.’

This was quite a dangerous thing to say in the kingdom of Frederick the Great, who prided himself on his benevolent paternalism – this was precisely what the regime was proudest of. Nevertheless, Kant’s inveighing against this is one of his most salient characteristics. To be treated as a child is like being treated as an animal – a horse being trained for a circus, or a canary. No matter how benevolent the tyrant, no matter how good his intentions, the idea of treating human beings as not being responsible was the greatest insult which you could offer to their humanity. Better, for Kant, to perform evil acts freely than to be conditioned into a smooth performance of nothing but good ones.

This was not compatible with what, for example, Helvétius taught. For Helvétius, as I said, what was wanted was to produce a rational society. How did you do it? Men were very corrupt and ignorant, and they were victims of superstition and of deception; therefore you treated them with sticks and carrots. You had to re-educate them. Re-education meant that you rewarded them for good acts and punished them for bad ones, and so you gradually conditioned them into being good citizens and you prevented what might be called ‘anti-social’ behaviour.

This, for Kant, was an absolute nightmare. The idea of having a lot of men manipulated by some other men, no matter what their intentions were, into jumping through certain hoops, no matter how desirable the route through these hoops was, or how rich the reward, or how happy they might become, was to destroy their very humanity. Happiness was not the goal. God had indeed made man into a very imperfect instrument if happiness was to be his goal, said Kant. And therefore the enemy were the French humanitarians, the French *philosophes*. They were the enemy because they mistook what was human in man: what was human in man was the freedom of his will, his power to choose – and that was what made him a man.

The whole notion, for example, of exploitation, with which we are today familiar, and which, after all, has had quite a career as a concept, really begins with him. You may ask yourself: What is wrong with exploitation? Why shouldn’t I use somebody else for the purpose of doing something which may not be criminal at all? I use people for the purpose, perhaps, of making them happy, or of making other people happy. I send them on errands, and I may

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

have to force them sometimes, if they are recalcitrant or obstinate, into doing all kinds of acts which will end in the good of society.

For Kant, to make anyone do something which he himself has not clearly willed to do, to make him the instrument of my will, no matter how benevolent my intentions, is to rob him of his humanity. That is what he calls exploitation. Therefore to use people for ends which are not their ends, to bring up people in such a way that their acts do not proceed from their purposes but from mine, is exploitation, degradation, humiliation, dehumanisation. These are all the things which we talk about now – the results of the actions of tyrants or of the State, or of the bourgeois order or whatever it might be – but the whole notion that exploitation is the greatest evil which you can inflict upon another human being, that it is some form of enslavement, it is some form of degradation, it is moulding him, it is treating him not as a human being but as a child or, worse still, as an animal, dates from the passionate sermons on the subject of the severe rationalist, Kant.

This is so, Kant holds, as far as human beings are concerned, and here he echoes, I dare say, Rousseau. Rousseau was, I suppose, almost the first person to say: 'The man who stands in dependence on another man is no longer a man; he is nothing but the possession of another man. Rousseau's whole life was preaching independence of others. Men must not depend on each other. Dependence on others created bullying on the part of some and flattery and grovelling on the part of others. It made men perform functions and play parts which did not spring from their own clear, moral perception of what it was that their natures cried for, but meant that they accepted all kinds of scales of moral value from other people, which they tried to serve in order simply not to be destroyed or to be bullied by these others, or in order to conform.

But even Rousseau said: 'The nature of things does not madden us, only ill will does.' That is also what the French believed, that only human ill will maddens you – the nature of things we accept. The French thought this, the Italians thought it, and the English thought it. But there was one nation which did not, and that was the Germans. Not only the ill will of human beings, but even nature appeared to be an obstacle to moral freedom, and this is quite a new note in European thought – not entirely new, because

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

it is to be found in the ancient world as well; but if it was known, it was forgotten.

In the eighteenth century nature, it must be understood, was treated with respect and benevolence. Nature is divine harmony, an organism, a mechanism, a hierarchy, an orchestra, a pyramid – there are all kinds of views of nature – but it is always conceived of as a kind of model or ideal, and men go wrong when they break away from it, when they behave in a manner which might be called ‘unnatural’, and the important thing is to return them to the bosom of nature. Even Hume, that profound sceptic, thought that if men behaved in some unreasonable fashion, nature, like a kindly doctor, would restore them to themselves only if they allowed themselves to be brought back to sanity and health by Mother Nature. Mother Nature, Mistress Nature, Dame Nature, nature’s apron strings to which we are tied – nature is always spoken of with extreme benevolence in the eighteenth century, as being a kind of model which we are to follow, an ideal which in some way we ought to understand and adjust ourselves to.

Not so Kant. ‘By personality’, said Kant, ‘I mean freedom and independence of the mechanism of nature. If I am the plaything of nature, if causal forces which operate on trees and stones and animals operate on me too, how can I be said to be free?’ He also said, in a desperate sort of way, that he felt trapped in a kind of cage, because, as a philosopher of science, as a man who tried to explain the external world and its workings, he was perhaps the greatest and most convincing defender of the most rigid causality in nature, and he thought any deviation from that was mere irrationalism. But that applies only to external nature. That is what I mean by saying there was a certain division inside Kant. This must not extend to men. If, he says, appearances – and by appearances he meant the external world, what we see, what we smell, what we feel – were real things, things in themselves, freedom could not be saved. Well, perhaps they were real; perhaps the world was merely a kind of tremendous treadmill in which one thing followed another with an absolutely rigorous necessity. If that was so, there was no use talking about morality, at least not about the kind of morality in which choice was possible. You could praise people for being beautiful: they could not help that any more than they could help having blood in their veins. You could praise people for being generous: perhaps they could not help that either, if they were born that way. You could praise

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

people for all kinds of qualities which they had in the way in which trees have qualities, in which animals have qualities; but if you were going to praise a man for performing an act of choice which he could have desisted from, for doing something which he need not have done, then the very idea that a man need not do something, that you can say to a man, 'You shouldn't have done that because you could have avoided it', the very notion of 'could have', is not applicable to a causal, rigidly determined nature, for Kant.

That is why he says that in his voluntary acts man is free and raised above natural necessity. Already Shaftesbury, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, had said: 'Man is not a tiger strongly chained or a monkey under the influence of a whip. Original native liberty gives us the privilege of ourselves and makes us our own.' But I do not think Shaftesbury developed this idea: he just said it as a self-evident truth, but did not proceed to elaborate it in any particular fashion. But for Kant this was the heart and palladium of his entire system. 'If', he says, 'our freedom is simply there to be a projectile, which of course could think it was free from the propulsion by which it flies, if we were like a clock which, once wound up, could claim to run on its own motive power, then our freedom were simply that of a mere turnspit.'²

Some people try to get out of this dilemma by saying, 'Well, all we need be afraid of is external causation, simply what is done to us by some kind of dead, inhuman nature, which tries to condition us.' But we are not conditioned. We act in accordance with our character – our character is our own. If a man does a good deed it is because he is a nice man. If a man performs a bad deed it is because he has a corrupt nature. He certainly does it because he chooses to do it; it is only his choice which is not free. His choice is conditioned by something – by his constitution, by his nature, by his character – but having chosen, of course, he can either do it or not do it.

For Kant this was not good enough. This is called the 'self-determining' theory of freedom, which is, in fact, the most commonly accepted view, even among philosophers today. For Kant the notion that all man wanted to do was to feel free from

² *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, ed. Karl Vorländer (Hamburg, 1990: Felix Meiner), part 1, book 2, section 3, p. 113 (= *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5 (Berlin, 1908), p. 97).

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

some kind of cold, brutal, external pressure upon him at the hands of a cold and indifferent nature, but that provided you assured a man that he acted in character, provided you assured him that although his behaviour was predictable, it was predictable from his own qualities, not from the qualities of something else, he felt quite happy, quite reassured – Kant denied this with extreme ferocity. He said that to try to attach to character what we have now removed from nature, to try to save the notion of freedom in that way, is nothing but a ‘miserable subterfuge’. That was his phrase for this view.

If, in fact, man is free, for Kant there is of course a dilemma: on the one hand there is the external world, to which the human body also belongs; but there is a dualism, there is something which is called ‘soul’, the spirit, the human will, which is above all in some sense free and soars above and in some way erupts into the causal chain, erupts from outside and alters its direction. There is some kind of free-swinging activity here.

Exactly the same applies to his ethics. Why do we do what we do? It is not the case, as previous thinkers have thought, that there are certain purposes which we cannot help aspiring to; that, for example, there are certain goals which human beings are born to seek and cannot help seeking. There may be such goals, but if man cannot help seeking them, they are not free. There are values which we want to realise in our lives. These values, for Kant, are not stars in some external heaven, objective entities which a competent philosopher can discern and describe as he describes animal or mineral species. What happens is that a man determines himself, a man freely chooses or commits himself to choosing certain values. We choose – we are not chosen for. And the morality of the act consists in the act of commitment; so the notion of commitment, the whole notion of the value of a moral act, consists in the fact that a man freely commits himself to pursue a certain kind of life, or to perform a certain kind of act. This notion really begins its serious career under Kant.

It is not the value which the man chooses that makes the act moral; it is the choosing of it. Still less is it the consequences. The consequences we cannot control; consequences we cannot tell about. Therefore what is the use of telling men to be utilitarians, when it simply reduces them once again to being some kind of mechanical playthings of nature herself? Nature may be ever so benevolent and ever so nice and ever so kindly, but if we are

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

simply toys in her hands, morality, for Kant, disappears. And he suffers an almost paranoiac fear of being locked up in a kind of terrible natural cage of rigorous determinist causation from which you cannot shake yourself free, which for him is a falsification of human nature. This is the heart and centre of Kant's moral doctrine. He sometimes qualifies it; he tries to get out of the dilemma in various ways; but he always returns to this one central point.

Therefore for Kant men are choosers of values, and they are ends in themselves. What is meant by saying men are ends in themselves? What it means is that if you are going to sacrifice a man to something, you must sacrifice him to something higher than himself – for example, to the State, to God, to the progress of culture or history, of your race or your nation or your Church. But, says Kant, nothing is higher than man. It is no good saying that the nation or the State or even God is a value which is in some way higher than that of man, because to be of value is to be chosen by man, the very act of valuation is what makes a value – in a certain sense you determine your values. If you do not invent them or create them, at least it is the choosing of them, the adhering to them which makes acts valuable or valueless. If it is that, there is nothing higher to which men can be sacrificed, because they are the authors of values.

Therefore, to sacrifice a man to something which is not himself is to degrade him, to exploit him, in some way to commit a sin against the Holy Ghost; it is to do the most immoral thing you can possibly do. Hence this constant insistence on the fact that you must not use men as means to ends but only as ends in themselves – that is the meaning of that formula. You must not use men as means to ends, no matter how splendid, because they must choose them themselves. If they do not choose these ends themselves, they become playthings. If they become playthings, they are dehumanised, and that is a crime. That is the heart of Kant's moral doctrine. It did not directly apply to politics; nevertheless, it did of course have its political implications.

The notion of nature therefore changes. It ceases to be that of a model or something to follow, which it is for almost the entire eighteenth century; nature now becomes the stuff on which you wreak your will, it becomes a kind of indifferent stuff, a kind of slag-heap with which you do as you like. At worst, it is an enemy: an enemy because the more natural you are, the more animal you

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

are. It is in a way the recrudescence in secular terms of the old Christian opposition between matter and grace, between nature and grace. Nature is what seeks always to kill you; nature is what wants to turn you into something causal; nature is your body; nature is all those forces which you can do very little about; nature is the inexorable, the inevitable, the determined. You, man, the moral being, the moral author, are not inexorable, not determined: you are free. And therefore nature is now conceived of as at best neutral stuff upon which you wreak your free will, at worst an enemy seeking in some way to enslave you.

This is new: the idea of hostility in nature is something which the French could never have accepted, and which they would have regarded, I think, as a little insane. But certainly Kant sets this doctrine going – of the self versus nature, the self versus the world, and not as part of that great world which the sciences can explain and give you authority over. Hence the very idea of a science of man – be it anthropology, sociology, psychology, no matter what – is for Kant simply the science of the non-human parts of man: his nervous system, his passions, his emotions, all the things which Herder thought Kant should not have isolated or divided from the rest of man. Certainly there can be a science of human passions: there can be a science of psychology, and this merely deals with the poor old empirical body. But there is something beyond this – there is the immortal soul. And of the immortal soul there cannot be a science, because it is free; if it is free, it obeys no scientific laws, it obeys only the laws which you set for yourself. But laws which you set for yourself are not inevitable – you need not set them for yourself. This he also derives from Rousseau.

This (if I may digress for a moment) is typical of the modern world. There is a great break, somewhere in the seventeenth century, away from the view according to which validity, truth, is something which exists out there, only those things are true for which you can claim that they exist in the external world, whether you want it so or not: that is what makes things true, that is what makes arguments valid. If there are laws out there created by nature or by God, that is the nature of things and that is what makes things true. In the seventeenth century, as a result of the rise of subjectivism, for various reasons which I cannot discuss here, there is a reversal of this. Only those things are valid or true which you make for yourself; only those laws are real which you

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

impose upon yourself. Laws are no longer laws in the natural sense – simply generalisations about what happens in the world. Laws now are rules. Rules need authors, and the author is myself. Therefore, from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, under the influence of Descartes and of Grotius[?], you get the notion that if a man obeys laws made by some outside force, he is a slave, but if he obeys laws made by himself, he is free. He is free because he can shake them off, he is free because they are of his own making.

Kant was rationalist enough, and enough of a child of the Enlightenment – far more so than Herder in some ways – to believe that there was a thing called practical reason, and therefore that all men who asked themselves what is right and what is wrong will arrive, because they are rational, at the same conclusion. He did not give very many clear tips about how to discover what is in fact rational, and this remains obscure in his works – it remains obscure in any case. The notion of what rational ends are is one of the most obscure problems of philosophy. Thirty years ago I thought I could understand it, but with increasing age I have become denser and denser on the subject, I have to admit, and no longer quite understand what rational ends are. Kant at least thought he understood, but he does not make it very clear. At any rate, the point is that he did believe that all men are rational creatures, and what is right for one man will, if he thinks in correct ways, be equally right for another man. Therefore there need be no conflict: there will not be a situation in which something is right for me which is incompatible with something which is right for you. He thinks there is some kind of natural harmony or coincidence because reason is the same in all men. This is a concession which he does make to rationalism.

But this is not the part of Kant which affected subsequent thought. At least, it did not affect it as strongly as the elements on which I am trying to concentrate. What really affected later thought was the notion that I must be my own author – autonomy – that I am the author of my own acts. Consequently, the notion emerges that what you have to work for is not happiness, not efficiency, above all not a world in which a lot of Helvétian or Holbachian wiseacres, a lot of scientists or a lot of enlightened despots, manipulate the human herd, even for their own good, because this is a degrading spectacle. What you have to work for is human dignity and the humanity of man – freedom, respect for other

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

people as valuers, as choosers. They are choosers in exactly the same way in which you are a chooser, and you must not choose for them, you must let them choose for themselves, even if what they choose is wrong. As I say, he profoundly believed that to choose wrongly is better than not to choose at all, because that is the essence of man.

I imagine that the worst kind of philosopher, from his point of view, would have been someone like Jeremy Bentham, who believed that all that was necessary was to create a society in which men were induced by self-interest to do things which would in fact make other people happy. Since they could not do it in the light of their own reason, you must create a society in which there are strong inducements for them to act in such a way as to make society harmonious, efficient and happy. For Kant, as I say, this is ultimate degradation of the whole of human nature, particularly when Bentham talks about human rights, which for Kant were absolutely sacred. Human rights simply reside in the fact that men are free choosers – that is what is meant by saying they have rights and they are human. Bentham said that rights are nonsense, and that the idea of natural rights was nonsense on stilts,³ mere bawling[?] on paper. He said this to the French revolutionaries, who made him an honorary citizen.

Kant was among the few philosophers of his day who approved of the French Revolution, not only the early stages of it, which everyone was very pleased about, but the later stages, when the Terror began and respectable persons were naturally horrified and began to curse it. He approved of it because he thought that for the first time a constitution was promulgated in which, at least in theory, every man was able to vote in accordance with his own impulses, or rather his own moral will. The voters might be wrong, but at least it was recognised that they were not to be dominated by other men, no matter who, whether clerical or secular, whether enlightened tyrants or any other wise oligarchical men, but were to be allowed to choose their form of government for themselves by a free act of voting. This appeared to him to be a colossal triumph in favour of what might be called the moral dignity of man, and that is why he remained a friend of the French Revolution from the beginning to the end of his life.

³ *Anarchical Fallacies*, in *Works*, ed. J. Bowring, vol. 2 (1843), p. 501.

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

This was not a very popular line to take in Prussia, and Kant kept rather quiet about it. In fact, he received a veiled but nevertheless very firm warning from Frederick the Great's nephew, who succeeded him on the throne, that even though he was a quiet professor of logic at Königsberg, it would not really do for him to propagate dangerous thoughts of this kind, and so he piped down, on the whole. But he did not change his opinions, and his writings still betrayed this rather wistful admiration for these heroic figures in Paris, no matter how violent, how bloodstained – which is a rather remarkable fact about this very quiet man who was born in Königsberg, never left it, and is otherwise the model of a quiet, decent, respectable provincial professor.

I now turn briefly to Kant's disciple, the dramatist Schiller, who, I think, also formed a link in the succession which I am trying to trace. Schiller is constantly talking about freedom, and he is talking about it in Kant's sense. He talks about the kingdom of freedom, the free principle in man, spiritual freedom, mankind whose sacred palladium is freedom, about inner freedom, moral freedom, the free mind, the independent principle in us, holy freedom which is our true fatherland, demonic freedom, and uses all kinds of phrases of that sort. He is absolutely intoxicated with the mere word 'freedom', which somehow means everything to him – above all, the power of resistance against the evil forces of nature. What he opposes to freedom is something called 'compulsion in nature', blind natural necessity, the forces of nature, such as emotions or instincts, as well as physical forces. It is not for man, as for other creatures, to reflect the rays of some other rational being, says Schiller, not even if he is a divine being himself: he must shine by his own light. And then something even more daring. Not even the Almighty can end our autonomy, not even he determines our will against our principles, good or bad, virtuous or vicious. All other things must, man alone wills. He is subject to laws neither of nature nor of reason. Of course he ought to be reasonable if he can be, but he is not subject to the laws of reason. If he chooses not to be rational, so much the worse for him, but he can – that is the point.

Nature comes off very badly in Schiller. Nature, he says, treads in the dust the creations of wisdom. Significant and trivial, noble and base, she involves them all in the same hideous disaster. She preserves the unimportant world of ants, but man, her most

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

glorious creature, she crushes in her giant's arm in one frivolous hour. So much for nature. Of course men seek servitude, men seek slavery, but they must not be allowed it. You might say that men might be happier as slaves, perhaps they are content as slaves, they can be drugged into slavery, they can be hypnotised into it, it may be that men do not want to lose their chains; but, echoing Rousseau, he says that if they love their chains, they must be shamed into throwing them off. They have no business to love their chains. Happiness is not enough: a man who grovels upon the ground, bound with chains, strewn with flowers, as Rousseau puts it, and says he is perfectly comfortable in them and does not in the least wish to be liberated, betrays his true nature. He has no business to be in chains; he must be liberated, no matter how much he struggles against it. This is Schiller's doctrine. Phaethon, said Schiller, the mythological son of Apollo, drove Apollo's horses wildly to his own disaster, but he drove them, he was not driven.

It was not only Schiller who said these things. This became quite a prevalent mood towards the end of the eighteenth century. The poet Blake, who was a Swedenborgian, said something very similar. He also had a kind of superstitious fear of being in some kind of scientific cage, of being trapped in a hideous causal universe in which he cannot act as a free human being. When in the famous poem he says, 'A Robin Red breast in a Cage/Puts all Heaven in a Rage', the cage of which he speaks is the cage of scientific rationalism, not a literal cage; and the villains of the piece are Newton and Locke – these are the people who have bound chains upon human beings and have prevented them from enjoying their freedom. Laws are needed to fence men off: 'And their children wept & built/Tombs in the desolate places,/And form'd laws of prudence, and call'd them/The eternal laws of God.' 'Art is the Tree of Life ... Science is the Tree of Death'⁴ – you cannot go much further than that.

This indicates that already towards the end of the eighteenth century there had begun this quite intelligible, if irrational, struggle against, indignation with, what was regarded as an over-tidy, spick and span universe in which human beings were like bricks in some noble edifice – mere bricks, unable to get out. Even Diderot, who was an Encyclopaedist – after all, he was the editor of the

⁴ [For refs see *Magus*, pp. 63-5.]

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

Encyclopédie and in a way an absolutely characteristic *philosophe* of the eighteenth century – speaks of the nearness of the great artist to the great criminal. He says that they both break rules, they are both in love with splendour and with power, they both take dreadful risks, they defy conventions. Farouche and savage inside, they create: the artist creates marvellous new, original, bold, upsetting art; and the criminal commits huge crimes. Diderot does not approve of the criminal, but he thinks these are the kinds of people who move mankind, not the more conventional figures, who are merely talented, merely respectable. I do not think that what Diderot says is corrupting – normally he thinks only along conventional Encyclopaedist lines – but the mere fact that such things could be said in the middle of the eighteenth century is an indication of the fact that a kind of dark revolt against what might be called ‘sheer rationalism’, ‘sheer Encyclopaedism’ – this whole edifice of a Newtonianised world in which morals and politics, our social lives and individual lives, will be regulated in accordance with the new laws of psychology and sociology, which will be discovered by scientists – is beginning to bloom.

Consider Kant’s view of punishment. It would be regarded as a highly reactionary view of punishment, but is perfectly characteristic of him. Kant believed in retributive punishment, not corrective punishment, not punishment by education, not punishment which is merely preventive and protects the people from the criminal. He believes in retribution because he thinks men are responsible for their acts, and if they are responsible, then they must be punished because they are responsible. If you take a man who is a criminal and you say: ‘The poor creature couldn’t help himself’, ‘He is not a thief, he is a kleptomaniac’, ‘He is not a murderer, he is a man who has been badly educated and didn’t know any better, and therefore he ought to be sent to be cured, he ought to be sent to the hospital’ – which is a perfectly humane, modern view – for Kant this is an insult, as it is to the criminal. The criminal, the free being, should actually prefer to go to prison in order to pay the price of his crime, because he knew what he was doing, instead of being regarded as a poor thing, inferior to the people who are sending him to the hospital. The one thing which he does not want – and this is a perfectly intelligible attitude – is to be regarded as a creature inferior to the scientists who judge him, to the doctors who institutionalise him. He would rather be a free criminal who knows what price he is going to pay, and if

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

necessary pays it, than a somewhat inferior creature who has to be pitied, who has to be well treated by people who are compassionate towards him because they are superior to him – they understand his motives, whereas he does not. They are the psychiatrists; he is the patient.

This, for Kant, is the ultimate insult to human nature, and so it is for Schiller. This is a perfectly intelligible attitude, and this is why Kant holds on rather strongly to what even in his day was a not particularly popular view of retributive punishment, because at least it recognises human responsibility to the fullest degree and allows that a man knows what he is doing as opposed to not knowing it.

To go back to Schiller for a moment, let me give an example of the kind of thing Schiller said, to show how this leads to the ultimate irrationalist assault. Schiller, of course, is a dramatist and is interested in the theory of drama. He is discussing the play, *Medea*, not Euripides' *Medea*, but the *Médée* of Corneille, written in the seventeenth century. Everybody knows the story of Medea. Medea was the daughter of the king of Colchis. Jason arrives from Athens in pursuit, with the Argonauts, of the Golden Fleece; he falls in love with Medea; he abducts her by her own wish; he marries her, and sails off with the Golden Fleece. Then he abandons her for another woman. Medea is indignant, enraged in fact, and proceeds to murder the children whom she bore for Jason – in some stories she merely strangles them, in other stories she boils them alive. Schiller does not approve of the act of boiling alive. He does not say that it was a particularly good thing to have done. But he says there would have been no tragedy if Medea were not a heroine, and she is a heroine because she rises above nature. By nature she is a mother, by nature she has a maternal instinct, by nature she ought to love her children and be incapable of this act. Nature is what would compel an ordinary woman not to do this act, but she rises above nature in a savage, monstrous and sinister way; she resists her natural impulse and dominates her own nature to such a degree that she actually puts her children to death, which is unnatural – contra-natural, in fact. This makes Medea a very sizeable figure, which is what makes her a tragic heroine. If she had not done that, if she had simply obeyed her impulses, there would be nothing interesting about her.

Compare her to Jason, who is a perfectly nice man, does not kill anybody at all, just an ordinary sort of middle-class Athenian

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

floating down the ordinary river of life, who obeys ordinary conventions – just keeps a mistress, and this is not unknown – a perfectly ordinary man of no size at all. He does not in any sense constitute a tragic hero; whereas the whole tragedy is in Medea because she is superhuman, because she is of monstrous size, and anybody who can resist nature in that way is fully human, even though she uses her freedom in a very abominable and wicked way. But she at least is a proof of the existence of freedom, and that is what Medea means to Schiller.

Exactly the same thing happens in a play called *The Robbers*. The hero, Karl Moor, who has been wounded by society, proceeds to become a criminal, and performs various crimes, against his own wife indeed, and against various other persons, until in the end he hands himself over to the police. But before he does that, the point is that the whole notion of the tragedy is that it is due to some sort of mistake. If you understood the nature of reality you would not need to act in this way. If Oedipus had known that Laius was his father, he would not have killed him and all would have been well. If Antigone had understood what was what, she would have acted in some manner which would not have involved her in the fate in which she was in fact involved. Therefore ultimately it is a matter of ignorance – maybe the gods send this ignorance to you, maybe you cannot help it, in which case it is very sad – but omniscient beings could not possibly be involved in tragedy. They would be harmonious, they would be happy – all tragedy is due to some kind of misunderstanding of what is what, or what nature is like, what means lead to what ends, or what truly makes people happy and what does not.

This is no longer true for someone like Schiller. In the case of Medea, in the case of Karl Moor, values have clashed. Society is no doubt evil and need not be⁵ for Karl Moor, but he is a heroic and demonic figure who struggles between violent ends: he cannot quite make up his mind between them, but he is perfectly free to choose. Whichever end he chooses, whether he chooses to obey the law or whether he chooses to defy it, something terrible will happen. If he chooses to obey the law, he will kill the impulse to freedom inside him; if he chooses to disobey it, he will make a lot of people miserable and commit various crimes. There is no solution to Karl Moor's problem, because not all values are

⁵ [Meaning unclear – mistranscription?]

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

compatible. This is the first moment at which you begin to see the break in the third proposition, the third leg of the tripod which I described at the outset, namely, that all true answers to problems of behaviour must be compatible with each other and form a kind of jigsaw puzzle. But if man is free, and free to do evil as well as good, and if man has more than one choice, perhaps three or four alternatives or possibilities on which he can embark, and if some of these possibilities are not compatible with possibilities chosen by others, then tragedy is built into the very nature of reality. Anything, however, is better than being a mere cog in some kind of machine. That is one thing which is not permissible.

The enemies are, as I say, Newton and Locke. And Schiller distinguishes between what is tragedy and what is not. He takes, for example, Laocoön, a man who knows that if he tells the truth to the Trojans about the Greeks the dragons will strangle him; and he does tell the truth, but he need not have. He chooses to do it because he defies what he knows to be his fate, and the fact that these snakes strangle him is evil. He could not have escaped – nothing which Laocoön could have done could have made him happy – and he chooses heroically. Regulus, who hands himself over to the Carthaginians because he promised to go back, performs a heroic act which he knows is going to end in the most ghastly disaster for him, and he cannot avoid it, do what he might. Satan, in Milton's poem, has seen all the horrors of Hell; nevertheless he goes on with his evil practices. Although this may be monstrous, it is heroic, it is dynamic, it is in some way free. But Iago and Richard III in Shakespeare are not tragic figures; they are simply human beings entirely determined by passions. Passions are parts of nature, and therefore we watch them simply like animals. They are clever animals who are trying to gain their ends in a way in which cats or dogs or tigers might, and therefore they do not stir pity, they do not stir horror, they are simply creatures of their own passions, not free, and therefore contemptible. There is a difference between resisting nature and following her, whether what you do is good or evil. To be driven by passion is certainly a form of heteronomy, or what later came to be called alienation. The enemy is always coercion, whether it is coercion by nature on the one hand, or whether it is coercion by the State on the other.

This, I think, is the Kantian heritage in Schiller, this perpetual harping on freedom, even if freedom takes demonic or monstrous forms. And later, of course, you find it among the heroes of the

KANT AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

German romantics, among the Byronic individuals who dominate their environment, even though they dominate it in a very sinister and hideous fashion. This derives from Kant's insistence – his obstinate, constant refrain – upon the fact that the most important thing about man is his will, not his reason but his will, because that alone is what frees him from nature and makes him into a creature who can determine his own fate. A man whose will is broken is no man. A man may be irrational, but he is still a man; but a man whose will is broken has ceased to be a man.

And so we have this highly rigorous, quiet, rational, above all scientifically inclined and logically coherent thinker, who, perhaps because of his extreme obsession with trying to escape from what he regards as the prison of determinism, because of his grappling with the problem of free will, invents the notion of the free ego or the free self. My next topic is the development of this idea by Fichte, who was a kind of treacherous disciple of Kant – that is to say, a man who claimed to be a disciple of Kant, but whom Kant regarded with absolute horror. Partly out of Kant, partly out of Herder, partly out of Schiller, Fichte elaborated Kant's notion into a vast moral and political doctrine which thereafter proceeded to dominate both German and non-German thought, and created a great many of the movements by which our own time is dominated. Fichte, in a word, is the villain of this particular piece, and it is he who socialises, politicises, publicises this basic idea. This is why the career of Fichte, who begins as an extreme romantic individualist and ends as a man who sings immense paeans to the powerful, organic, all-embracing State and nation – this career in which a man begins with his country's beginnings⁶ and ends with something which resembles some of the most intoxicating and sinister doctrines of the twentieth century – is, I think, a story worth telling.

© *The Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust* 2005

Posted 25 November 2005

⁶ [Meaning unclear – mistranscription?]