

THE LESSONS OF HISTORY

This is a lightly edited transcript of a text in Isaiah Berlin's papers. It represents a summary of a lecture, possibly prepared by Berlin himself. The precise details of the lecture's delivery are unknown. No attempt has been made to bring it to a fully publishable form, but this version is posted here for the convenience of scholars.

EVERYONE WANTS TO know the answers to the great questions that preoccupy human beings: What kind of world do we live in? What is wrong with it? How can we change it for the better? But there is something very peculiar about the fact that although thinkers – both learned men and politicians – have applied all the resources of reason and observation to these questions, history at times fails to turn in the directions they predict or aim for.

Consider the French Revolution. No event was more consciously awaited. Throughout the eighteenth century people expected an overturn, discussed it, wrote books about it, wondered what would make it. By the 1770s and 1780s the atmosphere was charged with impending change. Even though what happened in 1789–91 came suddenly, those who stood to lose most, the aristocracy, the Church, the royal bureaucracy, were, some of them, filled long before with the expectation of change, even of doom.

That period marks the rise of science and the rise of faith in technology. People supposed in the eighteenth century, partly under the influence of the unique discoveries of Newton, and the vast prestige and success of the natural sciences, that for the first time a real transformation of the human consciousness had occurred. Newton's work really did change the world and the field of possibilities. It was thought that if Newton was able in principle to determine the position and the motion of every particle in the universe by deduction from the relatively few laws that his genius, and the genius of others, had discovered, there was no reason why the whole of human life could not be organised in the same fashion. After all, men were three-dimensional objects in space and

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time, they were bodies controlled by physical, physiological and psychological laws. If we could learn the laws of physics, chemistry, psychology and physiology, why not the laws governing human society too? As Condorcet suggested, we study the societies of bees and beavers; and if we can discover what causes bees and beavers to be and behave as they do, there is no reason why we should not be able to do the same for human beings.

The conviction that we should study human society scientifically led to a simple view: the main problems of human life resulted from various human errors made in the past. These errors were a result of stupidity or idleness or were the fault of a minority of wicked men who had deliberately thrown dust in the eyes of the majority of simple men, in order to acquire power over them – a lot of knaves leading a lot of fools by the nose. Some of these knaves had been taken in by their own propaganda, others knew what they were doing. But in both cases wicked and ruthless kings, commanders and priests had misled humanity for generations. Now all that had to be done was to eliminate the errors, to expose such propositions as that God exists, that the soul is immortal, that the earth is flat. These could be disproved by observation and argument, and once this was done, the task would become relatively simple. First, it had to be discovered what human beings were like, what the laws were under which they operated. Then it would be necessary to discover what human beings wanted. This could be done by careful physiological and sociological enquiry. Men were not so very different from each other; these differences could be noted. It would be necessary to discover what human desires were, and what means were available to realise them. All this could be done by disinterested scientists. What was needed was the verified truth. Since all the evils in the world were caused solely by error, often ‘interested error’, as Holbach called it,¹ it

¹ [It seems most likely that IB took this phrase from an excessively free passage in a translation of Holbach’s *Système de la nature*. In part 1, chapter 1, ‘De la nature’, Holbach writes: ‘recourons à nos sens, que l’on nous a fausement fait regarder comme suspects’. In his 1820 translation Samuel Wilkinson renders this as ‘let us recover our senses, which interested error has taught us to suspect’. H. D. Robinson borrows Wilkinson’s invention in his 1868 version: ‘let us fall back on our senses, which error, interested error, has taught us to suspect’. However creative this Englishing may be, the sentiment seems entirely characteristic of Holbach, who writes, for example, of ‘erreurs utiles’ (‘useful errors’), *op. cit.*, part 2, chapter 12, and of ‘hommes fortement intéressés à l’erreur’ (‘persons with a strong interest in error’) in *Le Bon Sens*, § 82. I am

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could be supposed that once the facts were known, once it was discovered what human beings were really like and what they wanted, once means had been found by human genius to provide what they wanted, nothing more would be necessary.

Condorcet expressed this most forcibly when he said that 'nature binds, by an indissoluble chain, truth, happiness and virtue'. This led to all kinds of corollaries in the eighteenth century; for instance, that a good chemist is necessarily a good man. It could not be otherwise, because a good chemist is a man dedicated to truth. The truth is obtainable in human relations too. Once found, it was impossible not to live and act in its light. Hence a good chemist or a good physicist or a good anthropologist cannot fail to be a good father, a good citizen, a good man. All human problems could be solved by education, which made men want to search for the truth: and alter nature accordingly.

This was the great principle that animated the French Revolution. The ideal was, of course, to achieve universal justice, universal peace, universal happiness, universal wisdom and universal fraternity. The whole movement of 1789 and 1790 was one of the high moments of human exaltation and enthusiasm. When people called themselves good patriots in France, this was not nationalistic. At that stage, what they meant was, 'How marvellous to live under a constitution which at last is rational as well as human; which at last has destroyed the privilege of caste and class; which is founded on rational principles and truth, objective truth, which any intelligent man, using the proper instruments, can discover for himself; how wonderful that the nation which is achieving this is my own.' The ideal was the scientific organisation of life in accordance with publicly communicable principles.

But how very different were the results of the Revolution from those planned! The assumptions of the revolutionists were that man is capable of rationality and of organisation: that man, if properly taught by qualified experts, could organise his life on true and harmonious principles. The reformers believed in at least three propositions. They believed, first of all, that all serious questions have answers that can be discovered by human reason. If a question cannot be answered, it is not a genuine question. But if a

grateful to Roger Hausheer for putting me on to the trail of this hitherto elusive phrase – one of which Berlin was fond.]

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question is so formulated that, in principle, there must be an answer, then men can and will find the answer. One can, in principle, tell what the centre of the moon is like. One can, in principle, tell how various kinds of human beings behave in all conceivable sets of circumstances.

The second proposition was that the truth can be discovered by communicable techniques, not by intuitions, revelation, in sacred books, but by techniques that a man of genius can discover and any technician in a laboratory can thenceforth apply.

The third proposition was that all the answers are compatible; they can be put together. This followed from a principle rightly found in books on logic, that one true proposition cannot be incompatible with another true proposition. If all questions could be properly formulated and answered, and the answers then put together, the jigsaw puzzle would be solved, and we would know how to make humanity happy for ever.

And value judgements? Answers to such questions as what we live for, what is good, what is right, why do it, what is honour, why not betray one's friends, why freedom should be preferred to tyranny, why kindness is better than cruelty, peace better than aggression – the truth on all these matters would be established by the application of techniques very similar to those that worked in physics, biology, psychology, economics. Everything that was called philosophical, theological or psychological could be converted into positive science. That is more or less what Hume believed. That is what the French revolutionaries believed, what Comte believed, what H. G. Wells believed, what quite a lot of people still believe.

What actually happened as a result of the French Revolution? The events that occurred after 1789 drew attention not so much to human wisdom, human virtue, human rationality, human organisation, human order, but to the opposite. They showed the power of mobs, crowds and the masses – the exact opposite of what had been planned. They showed the enormous, astonishing influence of great men, of charismatic leaders such as Danton and Robespierre; and they uncovered the irrational forces to which such leaders appealed. They showed the role of accident and of violence in human affairs. By 1815, when the French Revolution was said to have completed itself, the picture is unlike what was planned. Instead of a rational, well-organised international order, governed by sage assemblies, people are in the grip of acute

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nationalism – irrational and divisive passions which the Revolution was against. There was not much real nationalism in the eighteenth century. It was thought to be an irrational, emotional drive that placed local interests before those of mankind. It was, in particular, much disapproved of by Frederick the Great, by the Emperor Joseph II, by the French *philosophes*, by Condorcet, by Robespierre. But the French Revolution led to the invasion of Germany Italy, the Low Countries, and to an extremely violent nationalistic reaction against the French invaders. The result was an outburst of wounded national feeling that is really the source of European nationalism in the nineteenth century. In fact, the word ‘chauvinism’ dates from the French Revolution.

The fate of the French Revolution made a number of people ask why it had gone wrong. The liberals held that this was because mobs and demagogues had not been sufficiently controlled. The socialists maintained that the economic and social factors lying beneath the surface had not been taken into consideration and that too much attention had been paid to purely political organisation. Historicists – Burke, Herder, Hegel – supposed that the factor of historical growth, unquantifiable, qualitative change of individuals and groups, of thought and action, had been ignored or grossly oversimplified. Catholic ultramontanes took the line that the whole rationalist approach was a mistake, that human beings were weak, sinful, and cruel, and that only by throwing oneself upon the mercy of God and trusting oneself to the authorised interpreters of the inscrutable will of God could humanity survive at all.

Later came the more complex doctrine of Karl Marx. He certainly supposed that he was a truly scientific observer of human affairs. Marx’s critique of the French Revolution was that the class struggle had not been taken into consideration. So long as there was such a thing as class war and its existence was not recognised, the judgements of excellent scientists, rationalists and ardent improvers of mankind, especially those who did not take enough notice of historical change, would be perverted by class interests, usually because these good people came from a class that stood to win by preserving the status quo in certain ways.

This was still an exceedingly rationalist answer. Marx in effect said, ‘These people have taken only factors A, B, C, D into consideration; we scientific socialists recognise factors E, F, G and H. And if we take them into consideration, we will comprehend reality: this will do the job; the trick will be done.’ The form of the

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argument was still the same: perfection is possible, humanity can be saved, a stable and decent free society can be created – if only we take into account certain important but hitherto overlooked factors: the economic ‘base’, the class struggle, and so on.

I cannot dwell long on Marx, only note this time-worn fact: that even in his case history did not proceed according to his prophecies. Marx supposed – with good reason according to his own premisses – that in the most highly industrialised countries, in the course of the sheer growth of productive forces, a proletariat would grow, organised and disciplined by the capitalists themselves. But, once organised, the proletariat would, once they understood their own interests and power, be capable of shaking off the capitalists, who would become progressively fewer because they were compelled to cut each other’s throats in savage competition. Because the capitalists would do so much to eliminate themselves, Marx warned against premature rebellions, terrorism or disorganised activity of any kind. He recommended that his followers form solid political parties, which would make the revolution by gradually squeezing the bourgeoisie to death.

As we know, very nearly the opposite occurred. The only country in which the programme was followed faithfully was Germany. There, a splendid organised socialist party came into existence. Industrialism increased in all parts of Germany, particularly in Prussia and the Rhineland. The workers grew in number. Their party grew more and more powerful. It built its own world of schools, hospitals, insurance schemes, theatres, playgrounds, concerts; the party looked after its members very humanely; it won more and more seats in the Reichstag. And after the defeat of 1918, the socialist party became the most powerful single party in Germany and ended by being easily and utterly eliminated by the Nazis. This happened, in part at least, because the socialists were so beautifully organised, so respectable, so integrated into German society, because they had created so many stable institutions, enjoyed so much security. When it came to the point, they were fence-loving, security-minded, with no revolutionary zeal, no aggressive feelings.

The only countries in which Marxist revolutions of a serious kind broke out, at least before the Second World War, were the two in which industrialism was least advanced, and in which, according to Marx’s principles, there should not have existed an adequate base for political activities by the workers: Russia and

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Spain. In Russia, where there was continuing oppression that was both corrupt and inefficient, one could operate only by the method of putsches, small revolts – in the end, organised revolution. This worked. But it worked against the programme Marx enunciated. The German Social Democrats obeyed the precepts of the Master blindly, and were crushed by the Nazis; the Russians deviated from them and, by doing so, won.

Let us look at the Russian Revolution of 1917. In theory, this revolution was to bring about a rational organisation of society. It was supposed to permit the gradual application of scientific method to the whole of society by means of a proletariat enlightened enough to support it. But again the results were the opposite. The effect of the revolution was to draw attention to the existence of the forces that had been ignored; it showed that terrorism paid, that charismatic leaders were obeyed, that democratic methods could be ignored, that minorities could sit on top of majorities and dominate – and oppress – them in their own name, without effective opposition.

The results of the last two great wars are not dissimilar. The 1914–18 war was fought, among other reasons, for the principle of self-determination. Empires were crushed. Small nations were established and given their proper frontiers. Again the old dogma was applied: here is the disease, and if the doctor is well enough informed, he has the cure. This is exactly what Wilson thought. But instead of the result anticipated, an appalling degree of economic instability, violence and general chaos resulted. As Trotsky said, the Treaty of Versailles converted Europe into a lunatic asylum but failed to provide the inmates with straitjackets. The Second World War was intended to produce some kind of democratic system once Nazism and Fascism were crushed. But again, its results were paradoxical. Instead of ushering in victory by the forces of democracy over totalitarianism, irrationalism and anti-humanism, it ushered in a reign of military dictatorships. There are probably more military dictators and more charismatic leaders in the world today than there have ever been before in human history.

But perhaps the most significant unforeseen result of the Second World War was to show the power of National Socialism and Fascism to organise human irrationality, to play on other people's nerves and aggressive instincts, to utilise everything the rationalists had always denounced. The use of this power by

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manipulators such as Goebbels was one thing not predicted by any of the prophets in the nineteenth century.

In fact, the experience of the twentieth century showed that an alliance could exist between science and irrationality. This, indeed, was something new. The general assumption had been that a scientist was a rational man, and would surely not have anything to do with somebody who was the opposite. But we have recently seen the emergence of politically irrational systems (Fascism and Nazism) that used the latest technological devices. And the scientists who submitted to the requirements of these governments felt that they could not simply opt out of the social system. They would do a good job on lines which the State commanded; they would be as loyal to the irrational State as they had been to any other. The combination of extreme competence among scientists with the violent irrationality of the leaders of the State was something that had never been foreseen. This was a new combination and struck humanity with amazement and horror. And this is again something we learned from experience and not through scientific prediction, or analysis of human character.

This terrifying alliance caused people to wonder whether it was enough to say that more knowledge would of itself make our lives more charitable, more humane, richer in aesthetic and ethical experience. No people had produced more erudite and brilliant scholars or more magnificent achievements in natural science than the German universities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. No country had a better system of public education, or had more distinguished historians and philosophers, than Germany in the 1920s. By ordinary criteria, it was one of the most civilised nations in the world. Yet this did not prevent that happening which did happen.

And now, twenty years after Germany's fall,² there are still people with ready explanations of our problems. They tend to say: If only we could get rid of one more obstacle, we really would be on the way to progress. If only we could get rid of the fanatical Chinese Communists (let us say), who hate the Western world or are possessed by some kind of intolerant Marxism, that would rid us of the last obstacle. Or, if we could only get some kind of permanent agreement with Russia, *that* would do it: only the absence of this obstructs our path.

² [If taken literally, this remark dates the lecture to the mid 1960s.]

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It is the ancient fallacy again. Men say: We know what the true ideal is, we know exactly where we want to arrive, but the enemy simply cannot be reasoned with; somehow our opponents have been brainwashed. For God's sake, can't this last obstacle be removed? Can't we have a peaceful world at last? If only we could overcome X or Y or Z – Communists, nationalists, imperialists, Americans, Chinese. There are a great many of them; well, that makes the task bigger ...

The temptation is obvious. There are many people who are convinced that they know what is right and good. They know that there seems to be only one final appalling obstacle. If it could only be shoved out of the way, even at the cost of a certain number of human lives, then at last mankind could progress.

By now it should be apparent that there is something wrong with this approach. Whenever it has been used, it has produced not what was anticipated, but the opposite. This is not to say that the approach is ineffective. On the contrary, it has at times had a considerable effect. The wars of religion, the French Revolution certainly changed things radically. So did Marxism, so did the Russian Revolution, so did the First World War and the Second World War. Man is not weak or ineffective in the face of forces of nature and history; he is strong, exceedingly strong. When people really do get together and make a revolution or a war, they do alter history, and they alter it in very violent ways, but often not in the ways they anticipate.

These facts suggest two central propositions. The first is that there may be something wrong with the belief that all political questions can be answered in definitive ways. In physics and mathematics and physiology we have no doubt made progress; we do know more than our predecessors, and can prove it. But in human affairs this is more doubtful. We do our best to perform rational analysis. But lessons of experience induce a certain modesty in claiming definite advance.

The second point is that it may not be true that all the answers – if we can find them – are necessarily compatible. This has been the premiss of the proposition that final, simple solutions to the great social problems can be discovered.

To the French revolutionary, for instance, all moral and political issues – for example, questions involving choice between peace and honour, liberty and efficiency, equality and liberty – must in fact have final and mutually compatible answers. The end

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is given – we know, said Saint-Simon, the oasis towards which we are all marching. The only problem is how to get the human caravan there. Thus all moral problems become questions of the correct technical means. One good end cannot (it is thought) conflict with any other good end. The jigsaw puzzle can be solved.

But if we consider some of these propositions, we will see that certain human values are not so evidently compatible with certain other human values. For example, where we say that we want the truth at all costs (if we really mean at all costs), we find that the costs are at times very high indeed. If we say we want to establish and proclaim the truth in all human matters at all times, we will have to tell the truth to some people who will be deeply wounded by it: how much good will it do to tell the stupid, the ugly, the unattractive, the incurably sick, that they are so? It is not self-evident that truth and happiness are always compatible – although this seemed so to the people of the eighteenth century. Neither is it self-evident that the highest efficiency and the widest liberty are necessarily compatible. Obviously, to allow unimpeded technological advance, human beings have to be organised in all kinds of ways which they may not understand, may dislike even if they do understand them, and may often resist. The questions are: How far can one justifiably go in trying to break their resistance? What about human rights? If we really believe in the supreme importance of technological organisation (as Saint-Simon did), then we must (as he did) deny the existence of human rights; it would be argued that no man should be allowed to resist the rational organisation of mankind, without which there can be no human progress, creativity, happiness. The people who refuse to obey well-laid plans for their happiness, and to move to their new houses (jobs, countries) are enemies of progress; we may be sorry for them, but they must be made to move. Rational organisation is guaranteed to make humanity happy; we cannot stop and consider the prejudices or the sensibilities of a few individuals who happen to cling in a sentimental fashion to some irrational or traditional form of life. Where the reward is so vast, all obstacles must be swept away: the price must be paid.

This leads some people to feel qualms. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Dostoevsky, Ivan Karamazov says that if he is told that human happiness can be obtained only by the torture of an innocent child, his answer would be, ‘This is not a price I am prepared to pay. If that is the cost, I have no wish to see the

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performance. I return the ticket.' How many innocent victims are worth sacrificing for how much human happiness? Hundreds? Some would say yes. Thousands? Some would still say yes. Hundreds of thousands? Millions? Some would stop only at that point; or not even there.

The fact that such figures can be considered by some calculators, while others reject the very notion of such sums with horror, indicates that there is some kind of collision of values here; and that it is not clear how it can be resolved.

The same can be said about liberty. If everybody were really free, the stronger could hit the weaker on the head. So we say, 'Yes, I'm afraid you'll have to forgo some of your freedom, because others are human beings too, and they too have rights; they have the same rights as you: in fact they are your equals. The liberty of the pike is not compatible with that of the carp.'

The general assumption, then, that all values can exist comfortably side by side, that we could have perfect freedom together with perfect equality and perfect efficiency, if only we knew how to achieve this, is not a self-evident truth at all. It would seem, rather, that certain values are not merely *de facto* incompatible with certain other values because we are ignorant, or because we have only limited resources to be divided between them. There is also, apparently, an inherent conflict; there seems to be an insuperable conceptual incompatibility between perfect justice and perfect mercy, between perfect equality and perfect liberty. All these are human values, and if anyone is ready to die for one of them, we respect him for it. But how do we decide which of these various values to pursue, or how much of which value should be sacrificed to what other value? It is not easy to be sure what guarantees moral progress: what is the unique final goal of men on earth.

Of course, this is not an argument for doing nothing; the fact that choices can be agonising does not entail that it is best not to make any choice at all. But there is a vast difference between saying that some ends are worth pursuing for their own sake, because they are good or right, and saying that we should pursue them because they embody the elimination of the last great obstacles, after which the gates of paradise will open. Evil things must be attacked and good ones promoted. But not because the end of the struggle is at last in sight.

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Two further reflections. First, some good things appear to have a darker side. In our own age, for example, we point out that automation has liberated people from all kinds of degrading forms of toil, that as a result there is a much wider and nobler future before them. But when we produce more leisure we also tend to produce the possibility of boredom. There is no doubt, for example, that boredom has affected young people in my own country today. The young men of England do not greatly fear unemployment or poverty. Most of them have jobs, and many have acquired material possessions which their parents could not afford and their grandparents could not even dream of. Having got these things, some among them naturally ask, what next? Having more leisure on their hands, and feeling uncertain about how to use it, they become exceedingly exhibitionistic, and now we have the young men in Carnaby Street suits whose unusual appearance is some sort of protest against society as it is. This is not a form of political indignation against specific evils, as some people try to maintain, but a result of the fact that, somehow, these young men feel stranded – without direction or ends to which they feel committed. This is what some of John Osborne's plays are about. His heroes feel that, idiotic as they may have been, nothing has taken the place of the old rigid ways of loyalty to king and country, or service in the army and a traditional family life. The army may have meant fighting a lot of Indians or Africans, and loyalty to the family may have meant oppression by some ghastly head of it, but still these were stable forms of life: it may have been misery and injustice, but the framework was firm. Obviously, we should not refuse to liberate prisoners simply because they do not quite know what to do with their freedom. But we must recognise that a certain kind of liberation creates its own problems.

The second reflection is that good is at times achieved in unexpected ways. When we examine the history of human happiness, toleration, peace, of all those ideals to which we in the Western world are wedded, we realise that they have not often come about as a benefit of the consciously thought out, rational application of universal plans made by infinitely wise social engineers or technologists. Mostly they have been attained the hard way. If we ask ourselves, for example, how religious toleration came to the Western world, we find that it came only after the Protestants and Catholics had fought bloody wars to the point of exhaustion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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They fought until enough of them realised that if they went on fighting they might be destroyed themselves. And although neither side gave up its principles, and each thought the other damned, they stopped fighting because they were afraid of a Pyrrhic victory. It was not the preaching of wise men like Erasmus or Comenius, or a general trend toward toleration, rationality or peace, that influenced them, but simply the problem of survival. Because they exhausted each other in these battles, they finally stopped fighting, and toleration became a kind of de facto compromise, or armistice, that lasted, fortunately, for quite a long time. And in this way many other human blessings have been achieved. People start with a fanatical belief in the possibility of some monistic solution, some kind of single end which, once achieved, will ensure happiness to mankind. They believe, therefore, that anything is worth sacrificing, because *the* solution – whatever it is – will surely be the *final* solution. Their belief in a monistic solution tends, in the end, to be toned down to a compromise. We should like to hope that this is the result of argument, of looking at the facts of human history, of the advances of psychology or sociology. But in fact compromises are usually reached only after various factions fight and fight until they can no more, and the dreadful cost gradually leads men to the realisation that they must learn to tolerate each other. It is very difficult to get people to tolerate each other unless they have tried intolerance and failed. This is a melancholy reflection on human character.

What should we do? No doubt, we need more knowledge of ourselves: individual and collective, psychological and social. No doubt we must admit that we have not studied ourselves enough; there are all kinds of dark and irrational drives in us that have not yet been properly understood. The French reactionary philosophers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, influenced perhaps by the loss of life in the Revolution and the wars that followed, claimed that what people really like is not co-operation, but collective self-immolation on a common altar. Armies are told to march, and though they do not know where or why they are marching, they march. Mutiny in an army is comparatively very rare. What people evidently adore, one of these pessimistic reactionaries said, is being slaughtered together for some unintelligible ideal. This is exaggerated: but so is the optimistic opposite. Too many rationalists have not noticed these dark destructive forces, or do not consider them or accept them

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until they hit their own heads against them. By that time it can be too late. They begin by discovering the solution – the official solution – and this they must embrace: the simpler, the more attractive. That is why the prophecies of the system-builders often come to naught.

Contemplation of modern history alone ought to lead us to the view that there is no simple solution, such as that the answer lies in technological advance, or a return to some ancient faith, or self-determination, or utilitarianism, or Communism, or socialism, or individualism, or capitalism, or any other -ism or single idea. If our generation can learn anything from the past, it ought to contemplate two suppositions about human goals. The first is that not all goals are compatible. The goal is chosen for itself, not in the hope that success in attaining it will guarantee the attainment of other corollary goals, but with the realisation that it may foreclose them. If X is chosen, Y may be irretrievably lost, and nothing can be done about it.

The second supposition is that human beings, in the process of seeking their goals, transform themselves. And by transforming themselves they alter their goals too. We begin by seeking goal A, let us say economic prosperity or social equality, and the more we improve our own social structure and outlook and behaviour the more our aims and goals will in turn alter. We cannot therefore predict today what our goal will be tomorrow. Any attempt to put humanity in a straitjacket, no matter how noble the intention, is dangerous. We say that what men really want is A, B and C; so we will provide them with A, B and C, though of course at some cost. One must (we are told) break eggs to make omelettes. Very well, we break the eggs – but the question is whether the omelette has been worth it. After breaking the eggs, even though the omelette is edible, those for whom it is made may no longer want to eat it. The very success has altered them: they now want quite a different dish. So more eggs have to be broken, and so the egg-breaking process can continue for ever, so long as we insist that a given omelette is the final goal of our – or mankind's – desire. It is better to be more scrupulous about breaking eggs – or lives – once we know that, no matter how many are broken, the dish produced may well not be what, by then, we shall need and idealise.

These two suppositions seem to constitute one of the few dependable lessons of history. We cannot fully predict the future, and we have to realise the necessity for choosing among

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incompatible ideals; and for living in a society in which different people may seek different, equally valid, ends. We must learn to be satisfied with the maximum effort to preserve some kind of precarious equilibrium between variations of goals and of men, a system of world order in which necessary change can occur without breaking the delicate crust without which human life cannot exist, and without which no ideals can be properly worked for and preserved.

This is a very difficult and a very undramatic thing to do; it can be tedious and the tension is not good for the nerves. It is an extreme strain to have to be continuously aware of the fact that all we are trying to do is preserve a social framework or individual health which is constantly threatening to crack and requires to be patched up and propped and protected. It is far more agreeable and exciting to have a shining ideal, to think that we are approaching it because we have already conquered a given number of obstacles, and there are only a finite number more, after which we or our children or grandchildren will enjoy perpetual sunshine. The most noble and moving of democrats, Condorcet, was sure that the day would arrive at last: the day on which mankind will be happy, free and wise. But this is not very likely, because it is an a priori truth that one cannot have everything. Herder said long ago that we cannot recapture that which made the ancient Greeks or Jews or Indians wise or happy or great. That is gone for ever. This truism – that we build for our time, and then we shall see – is the strongest argument for what must be called a rather untidy liberalism: values are not less sacred because they are not eternal. This is a liberalism in which one is not over-excited by any solution claiming finality or any single answer; where, above all, one is not deluded by the thought that one is called upon to remove the terrible obstacles that are the last great stones that stand before the doors of perfection, and that the destruction of entire societies is not too high a price to pay for victory in the war to end all wars, the overcoming of the last great obstacle, after which prehistory ends and true history begins.

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