

The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library

SOME PROCRUSTATIONS

The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library aims to post, in the fullness of time, PDFs of all Berlin's uncollected and unpublished work, including lectures, interviews and broadcasts, so that it is conveniently readable and searchable online. The present PDF is part of this series.

The page numbers in square brackets mark the start of the relevant page in the original publication, and are provided so that citations from book and online PDF can use the same page-numbering.

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk

SOME PROCURSTATIONS

Oxford Outlook 10 no. 52 (May 1930), 491–502: *harbinger of IB's mature pluralism*.

As there are numerous pursuits, arts and sciences, it follows that their ends are correspondingly numerous.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1. 1. 3

Human life is defined by the capacity for sensation and thought. [...] But life is a thing good and pleasant in itself, for it is definite, and definiteness is a part of the essence of goodness [...]. We must not argue from a vicious and corrupt life [...], for such a life is indefinite [...].

ibid. 9. 9. 7–81

THAT EVERY separate mental activity can properly be judged to have failed or succeeded only by reference to its own particular end and its own particular standard, and by reference to no other end or standard, though some of these ends may be found to coincide, is so plain and obvious and self-evident that to emphasise it might at first seem like breaking in through open doors. But an oddity exists in connection with this truism which seems worth emphasising because it is so very odd. Whereas few question the theoretical truth of our proposition, as a practical canon of criticism it is continually ignored and violated by reputable and apparently honest authors, and that tacitly, mostly without the slightest suggestion that they are aware of its existence, not to speak of its plainness and obviousness and self-evidence. These reputable and (probably) honest critics obscure every issue by applying to one activity a standard which belongs to, and was evolved out of, some essentially different activity; they ask irrelevant questions and then vitiate their judgements by founding them on the equally irrelevant answers. The irrelevant answer obtainable by using a false standard may be entertaining enough simply through being irrelevant: the various effects produced by

¹ Whether or not this is true of life in general, it is at any rate completely true of thought.

SOME PROCRUSTATIONS

hearing the opera *Don Giovanni* on the private morality of audiences [492] of various nationalities might prove a fascinating enquiry; yet it may be doubted whether the statistics of this subject compiled by some delicately sensitive expert in social ethics, like Magistrate Mead² who saves Society on weekdays and by force, or Journalist James Douglas³ who performs this task on Sundays and by means of moral suasion only, would contribute anything of value to Mozart criticism, though they might save innumerable souls from degradation.

What happens when the moralist finds an aesthetic on his solitary moral standard is too notorious to need exposure: the views on art of Moses, Plato or Tolstoy are now interesting only to the psychologist, for the strange light they throw upon their authors' minds. It should be clear without concrete instances that standards, once they are lifted out of their proper sphere of application, cannot help being used promiscuously and irrationally, and this leads to a complete confusion of words and values, and a chaos is created, a cloudy atmosphere of mist and drift, infinitely worse than the 'all-corroding, all-dissolving scepticism of the intellect',⁴ because in it nothing firm, sharp, ordered can survive; and since it is of the essence of criticism, as a function of the intellect, to establish order by making firm, definite and acute examinations of something A in relation to other things B, C and D, measured by the constant standard X, the edges of criticism must become blurred and shapeless in this flux, until they yield to records of pure emotional responses, incoherent ejaculations and sheer *cris de coeur*, which always precede its death and final dissolution. There are some who are quite definitely not ashamed of this decay of their intellect: the Bergsonian writings of Professor Édouard Le Roy of the Collège de France contain this Delphic ecstasy:

Distinctions have disappeared. Words no longer have any value. One hears welling [493] forth mysteriously the sources of consciousness, like an unseen trickling of living water through the darkness of a moss-grown grotto. I am dissolved in the joy

² Frederick Mead (1847–1945), metropolitan magistrate with a reputation for moralising.

³ 1867–1940; Editor of the *Sunday Express* and supporter of censorship.

⁴ John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro vita sua* (London, 1864), 379.

SOME PROCRUSTATIONS

of becoming. I give myself over to the delight of being an ever streaming reality. I no longer know whether I see perfumes, or breathe sounds, or taste colours.⁵

It is too easy to pillory this; but it must be remembered that it comes not from a mystic, or a *surréaliste*, or an epileptic, or a stream-of-consciousness novelist – it is the delirium of an official philosopher, an intellectual, what M. Benda calls a clerk.

And lest it be thought that ultra-emotional writers of the Le Roy type stand alone, and that it is ungenerous to hold them up to further ridicule, it will be shown that the heresy is omnipresent and now even the defenders of Reason themselves remain untainted by it. According to the degree to which critics have allowed this confusion of standards and criteria to take place in their minds, to that extent their critical statements are bound to be, a priori, worthless.

The weapons of criticism, scrutiny and analysis, make it certain that criticism can never present the actual substance of the thing criticised – that can only be apprehended, whether in art, philosophy or religion, by some unanalysing, immediate, though not necessarily momentary act of *inspection*, *insight*, *intuition* or any other faculty which simultaneously affords the first indication that the thing is there at all, and goes *into* the thing and grasps its essence in one direct sure movement. Criticism is forced to go about and about the thing, searching and exploring; it can formulate and present the context of experience in which the thing is found, it can discover, describe, abstract, [494] analyse and reassemble all the necessary and all the accidental factors, conditions, states, which are integrated into the thing criticised, without some of which it could neither exist nor be conceivable. And for this purpose definite canons, standards and criteria are required, and the substitution of irrelevant for relevant standards conjures up a false context in which the object of the critique must appear either quite meaningless, or at least grotesquely distorted.

⁵ Quoted by Mr Irving Babbitt in his introduction to M. Julien Benda's admirable *Belpégor* [1919], trans. S. J. I. Lawson (London, 1929), [ix]. The case against emotionalism is there overstated, but though the method is violent it is nowhere unscrupulous, and, in view of the prevalence of the vice attacked, is clearly justified.

SOME PROCRUSTATIONS

This is what happens when ethical standards are applied to art, but it happens no less when artistic criteria are applied to ethics or metaphysics, and it is only because the latter happens more rarely that the disastrous effects escape notice. It happens more rarely because there are fewer artists who discuss metaphysics than philosophers who dabble in art criticism, but when the former set to work, the distortion produced by them is, if anything, more violent than anything achieved by philosophers.

To demonstrate this we shall take the case of Mr Wyndham Lewis, an artist of such wonderful violence of convictions that one is forced to listen to him whatever he may be saying. Mr Lewis discusses Bergson and calls him, among many other things, 'the perfect philosophic ruffian, of the darkest and most forbidding description',⁶ and then adds further remarks to this effect. We do not deny that to attack Bergson can be a very great pleasure; but that fact alone hardly justifies a splenetic assault of this type. You do not call a man a ruffian because he seems to you to have missed philosophic truth; the cause of this must lie somewhere in Mr Lewis himself, and the particular part of him which seems responsible for this outbreak is unmistakably his eye. Mr Lewis is first and foremost an artist, more specifically a draughtsman. Experience comes to him primarily through the *eye*. [495] He is what the French call a *visuel* as opposed to an *auditif*, and perceives everything in his own visual terms. He cannot help creating God in his own image, as the Draughtsman of Heaven, and so conceives of all created matter as something cleanly and sharply outlined, all reality as something fixed, firm, certain and static, as a design or a building is static. Music, for example, to him is typical of an undifferentiated mass, drifting and flowing, vague, shapeless, untranslatable into visual language and therefore automatically repellent. He is personally revolted by what he sees as a spectacle of flow, change and process, and loudly proclaims this purely temperamental, even physical, reaction of his. When, for whatever reason, he turned his mind to metaphysics, he still went on unconsciously transcribing everything into terms of eyesight, and the philosophy of change, whether presented by Heraclitus or Bergson, affected him as music had done. Unlike Professor Le Roy, he was not dissolved in the joy of becoming. The thought of

⁶ Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (London, 1927), 174.

being an ever-streaming reality in a moss-grown grotto nauseated him. But if he had introspected even for a short while, he might have realised and even explained to others that his disgust was instinctive, and arose because he was incapable of thinking in abstract terms; and then metaphysicians would not have troubled about this misosopher, though psychologists might appreciate so rare and interesting an instance of an artistic mentality in its pure state. Instead, he has deceived himself into a belief that philosophic jargon makes a philosopher, and, clothing what amounts to a confession of personal aesthetic likes and dislikes in metaphysical language, he puts forward opinions which at first puzzle by their strangeness; when the initial fallacy comes to light the strangeness evaporates: he has simply applied to problems of metaphysics, whose standard [496] in reality, psychological criteria of pleasantness and unpleasantness. The doctrine implied in this is that pleasure is truth, truth pleasure.⁷ That is all Mr Lewis knows, and even that he leaves to others to discover: the emotion of Mr Lewis is akin to that which caused the famous storm of protest against Epstein's *Rima*. In both cases critics felt that they could not understand what had happened, and were very, very angry. Mr Lewis has, if we may say so, painted *Creative Evolution* green.

We may perhaps be forgiven if we emphasise the obvious,⁸ and repeat the fact that that otherwise exciting book *Time and Western Man* is philosophically ludicrous because the author allows his draughtsman's eye to affect his metaphysical judgements, and allows full play to the resultant bias. There is a recently told story of a fellah who accused one of his fellow villagers of theft, swearing heavily that two kids had been stolen from him. He was later forced to admit that only one had in fact been stolen. He was asked by the judge why he had sworn that he had lost two. 'Perhaps I was annoyed,' he said. He was prosecuted for perjury.

⁷ From time to time he gives himself away completely as when, during an attack on Whitehead's doctrines, he adduces as a fatal objection to them that 'This may be true; but it is difficult to see how it is cheerful' (*ibid.*, 183). He is usually more careful.

⁸ If anyone is disposed to protest against these reiterations, let him remember Goethe's impatient 'Alles Gescheide ist schon gedacht worden, mann muß nur versuchen es noch einmal zu denken' ['Everything clever has already been thought: one can only try to think it once again': *Maximen und Reflexionen über Literatur und Ethik*, in *Goethes Werke* (Weimar, 1887–1919), xlii/2, 167]. This accurately represents the tendency of this essay.

But, after all, his crime was not so very much worse than Mr Lewis's: he too had only mistaken cause for reason and had accurately reported the psychological cause of his falsehood. Mr Lewis, if asked why he so vituperates Bergson or Whitehead or Alexander, might also say that perhaps he is annoyed. This would shed a clear light on his critical methods and might prevent much perplexity in those of his [497] readers who may have taken him at his own valuation, as a champion of Reason.⁹

But Mr Wyndham Lewis is, after all, an isolated case, and his philosophic followers cannot be many; though he does trespass on the more or less sacred ground of philosophy, it may all be explained away as a sheer piece of naughtiness, as a wild but innocent escapade on his part, of no significance to anyone. So far all might have been comparatively well. But there is an even greater enemy of Reason in the *Kulturphilosoph*. The 'philosopher of culture' says that he alone is free: he is not a metaphysician, nor an aesthete, nor a logician, nor does he confine himself to moral theory, or epistemology, or axiology. His subject is human culture, pure and simple. What is culture? That only the *Kulturphilosoph* can tell you. *All* human activity enters his province. Is not human experience one, whole and indivisible, and are not all our philosophic compartments illicit dichotomies, false abstractions and isolations from what can only be regarded truly as an integral unity? Very well, his function is to expound the One. If you point out that there is diversity in unity, he will interrupt and explain that, though diversity exists, what is significant is not this, but the fact that in this diversity there is an evolving unity.

But if that is so, the function of the *Kulturphilosoph* is not to pronounce judgements of truth, which belong to the epistemologist, or of goodness, which belong to the moralist, or of usefulness, or of value, or of reality, which belong to the province of specialists [498] in the various parts of the experienced cosmos, but only to act as a liaison officer, to point out significant connections between various experiences and the activities which

⁹ Twenty years ago Charles Péguy declared that he who considers a philosophy to find out whether it is true or false simply does not know what he is talking about, because all that matters is its survival value. But then Péguy never pretended that he was anything but a Bergsonian with a faith in the infallibility of feeling and intuition. Mr Lewis supposes himself to be defending Reason against Bergson; hence it is unforgivable when *he* surrenders to instinct.

SOME PROCRUSTATIONS

spring from them, collecting evidence, perhaps, for historians or social scientists, but doing little else. One may be quite sure that if any such suggestion were made to any full-blown *Kulturphilosoph*, to Count Keyserling, say, or Herr Spengler, or even Mr Powys,¹⁰ they would feel deeply, seriously outraged. Mr Clive Bell, too, may seem to have toyed with *Kulturphilosophie*, but he continually fails to take either her or himself seriously, and may be gracefully exonerated from our charge.

As for the charge, it is this: Count Keyserling, Herr Spengler and Mr Powys imply that they find themselves able to decide questions hitherto treated departmentally and piecemeal, by the application of the simple universal test 'Is it conducive to culture?' If pressed as to the meaning of 'culture', they would probably advance some perfectly innocent explanation, such as that it is that state of society in which the system of conscious human activities reaches its highest pitch of effectiveness and excellence, or something harmless of this kind. To take a possible instance of this method, Count Keyserling, Herr Spengler and Mr Powys, to decide whether a given action is morally good or not, would, if they are to apply their criterion scrupulously, have to ask 'Does it conduce to culture?' – that is, to that state of society in which the system of conscious human activities (which include moral action) reaches its highest effectiveness. That is, this act, if it conduces to society's being most effectively moral, and does not obstruct its other activities (and this last is otiose, for it cannot be so, since true morality is by [499] definition in harmonious co-operation with the other activities with which it forms the *Kulturphilosoph's* experiential One), then it is good and moral. So an act is moral when it helps someone to be moral. It may be doubted whether it is for this that the world has spent three thousand years in ethical enquiry.

No harm would, however, be done if the *Kulturphilosophen* contented themselves with mild tautologies of this kind; but they are more ambitious: they want the rights and status of the philosopher proper, to which a certain sort of glamour still popularly attaches, and will not purchase them by their own attainments; instead, they adopt the policy of direct and wholesale annexation.

¹⁰ A book called *The Meaning of Culture* by John Cowper Powys has recently [London, 1930] been published by Mr Jonathan Cape.

SOME PROCRUSTATIONS

By casting overboard all other criteria and standards of criticism, and taking as criterion such an indefinitely extensible term as 'culture', in whose pocket other criteria can peacefully live side by side, ready to be pulled out for use at any moment, wherever convenient, they satisfy themselves that they have managed to abolish all frontiers in criticism, and achieved just that possibility of promiscuous and random application of various criteria to matter essentially foreign to them which saves the critics from all necessity of conforming to any fixed standard, from responsibility of choice of criterion, and so from any need to answer for their official pronouncements. And there are some whom this naive and unscrupulous stratagem has actually taken in; they do not perceive that the criticisable element of anything is not that which it has in common with everything else, but that which it has not, not its genus but its differentia, that very private, peculiar differentia which determines its relation to the whole system of things, not the bare fact that it *is* a member of a system. It is these differentiae which criticism, philosophic as well as artistic, deals with, and the first [500] sign that it is being abandoned and chaos is being introduced consists in the crude attempts to divert attention from the specific and particular to that which is common, identical and undifferentiated. Then, having got rid of definite standards, your Spengler or your Keyserling feels that there is nothing to prevent him from delivering judgements on anything he pleases (including even the individual essence which no criticism can ever touch), quasi-substantiated by his universal criterion, which, because it really is all-embracing, is bound to be empty. 'Culture', 'Civilisation', 'Progress' are favourite types of this pallid criterion, which, as it trespasses over the fields of human activity of various hues and shades, does not even turn into a consistent chameleon, but remains without colour or significance. As for *The Meaning of Culture*, it is the book of a neurotic, unhappy, earnest dilettante, soaked in Spengler, and is written in a style which is both comic and pathetic, at which, however, it would be heartless to laugh, because Mr Powys is desperately sincere. He is best described in his own words as one in whose case the world has left 'a person's whole interior being completely untuned, debauched, ruffled, outraged, with an acrid taste of Dead Sea ashes

in the mouth!¹¹ We must not quote more, because all this is touchingly honest, and all the author's worthless experiences are obviously genuine. The Count and Herr Spengler have set their trap and have caught a simpleton; the result is an unbelievable parody of both their styles; if they see this book, it will be a cruel experience, especially to Spengler; but he calls for no pity.

If Mr Lewis was not entitled to the luxury of losing his temper merely because there was something which annoyed him, it follows that when I find myself in a similar position, I too am not entitled to show any signs of irritation. [501]

I can only reply that any form of attack on Procrustes and his school is *eo ipso* justified, and quote in support of mine this passage from the *Leviathan* which forms the epigraph of Professor Broad's *Scientific Thought*.¹² 'Noli, lector, expectare hoc loco, contra philosophiam aut philosophos orationem invectivam. [...] Distinguo inter philosophos et non philosophos; et inter philosophiam veram, vitae humanae magistram sapientissimam, humanae naturae decus singulare, et illam, quae iam diu pro philosophia habita est, fucam et garrulam meretriculam.'¹³

To me it is not conceivable that any intelligent human being can consciously deny that each activity evolves out of itself, and involves conformity to, its own private standard, and therefore requires the critical use of its own peculiar criterion. If the man in the street does not trouble about this, he is, after all, in the street, and of the street nothing better is expected. But something different is expected from the minority of men who call themselves free and proclaim that they stand above the melee, because with the name of critic is still associated the respect due to disinterested search for the truth. It cannot be that this proposition, which was old and obvious in the day of Aristotle, should appear to them to be not only far from obvious and self-evident, but palpably untrue. It is too difficult to believe in the

¹¹ *ibid.*, 147.

¹² C. D. Broad, *Scientific Thought* (London, 1923), 11.

¹³ 'Do not, reader, expect here that I shall heap abuse on philosophy or philosophers. [...] I distinguish between philosophers and non-philosophers, and between true philosophy, the wisest guide of human life, the peculiar distinction of human nature, and that painted, chattering whore which has for so long now been regarded as philosophy.' *Leviathan* (Latin edition), part 4, chapter 46: *Thomae Hobbes Malmesburiensis opera philosophica quae latine scripsit omnia*, ed. William Molesworth (London, 1839–45) iii 489–90.

SOME PROCRUSTATIONS

possibility of this huge epidemic of intellectual ophthalmia. If an alternative solution must be suggested, it may be that the few as well as the many start with some irrational conviction; then, those among them who possess a conscience and wish to suppress it, inflict upon themselves a long and deliberate process of self-stultification, which confirms them in unreason for the rest of their lives. This acephalous attitude represents a wilful betrayal of the intellect; it marks the complete loss of that desire which gives [502] to thought whatever value it possesses, the desire to discriminate, to eliminate the anarchical in experience, to introduce order into every form of contemplation.

Copyright Isaiah Berlin 1930

Posted in the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library 6 January 2019