

TWO CONCEPTS OF LIBERTY

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*Original dictation (C)*

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[Cassette 3, side B; CD 5, track 2]

[*part of* v

*The Temple of Sarastro*]

[192] [This can perhaps be put in another way. Freedom is self-mastery –] the elimination of obstacles to my will. If nature resists me, I try to mould her by technical means, and impose [my will upon her.] But how am I to treat [recalcitrant human beings? I must, if I can, impose my will on them too, ‘mould’ them to my pattern, cast parts for them in my play. But] will this not mean that I am free while they are slaves? They will be so if my plan has nothing to do with their desires or values, [193] only my own. But if my plan is rational it will allow for the full development of their true natures, the realisation of their rational desires as part of the [realisation of their capacities for rational decisions as a part of the realisation of my own. All true solutions to all genuine problems must be compatible; more than this, they must fit into a single whole; for this is what is meant by calling them all rational and the universe harmonious.] Each man has his specific character and purposes. If I grasp what these are, how they relate to one another, then I can, at least in principle, satisfy them all, so long as the natures and the purposes are rational. Rationality is knowing things in people for what they are. I must not use stones to make violins, nor try to make born violin players play flutes. If the universe is governed by reason, that is, the discoverable pattern in which everything and everyone plays the part it is meant to play by its own inner nature, then there will be no need for coercion. A

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correctly planned life for all will coincide with full freedom – the freedom of rational self-direction – for all. So long as each player plays the part set him by reason, there will be no conflict. Each man will be a liberated, self-directed actor in the cosmic drama.

When Spinoza says [that] children, though they are coerced, are not slaves, because they obey orders given in their own interests, or [that] the subject of a true commonwealth is no slave, because the common interest must include his own; when Locke says, ‘Where there is no law there is no freedom’, because rational laws are directions to a man’s ‘proper interests’, and since such [law is] only what ‘hedges us in only from bogs and precipices’ [it] ‘ill deserves the name of confinement’, and then speaks of desires to escape from such laws as being forms of ‘license’, ‘brutish’ etc.; when Montesquieu, forgetting his liberal moments, speaks of political liberty as ‘the power of doing what we ought to will’ – what all these thinkers, and many a Jacobin and Communist after them, assume is that the rational ends of our true natures must coincide, or be made to coincide, however violently our poor unreflective desire-ridden passionate empirical selves may protest against this process. Freedom is not freedom to do what is irrational or bad; to force empirical selves into the right pattern is not tyranny but liberation. On this (I may remark in parentheses) Bentham seems to have said the last word: ‘The liberty of doing evil, is it not liberty? If it is not liberty, what is it then? [...] Do we not say that liberty should be taken away from fools, and wicked persons, because they abuse it?’

[194] When Rousseau tells me that in giving myself to all, I give myself to none, and I get back as much as I lose, with enough new force to preserve my gains, because an entity built out of the equality of sacrifice of all its members cannot wish to hurt any one of them; when the great declarations of the rights of man and citizen [195] assume that the bounds of human rights can be established by any rational man, for any rational man can in principle discover the true solution to any problem; the assumptions they make are: (1) that solutions to social problems resemble solutions to the problems of the natural sciences; (2) that reason is what the rationalists said that it is, namely the discernor of true answers to all genuine questions whether of theory or of practice.

If this were true the conclusion would follow. In the ideal case liberty coincides with law, for both are demands of the selfsame

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reason; autonomy coincides with authority; rational men are wholly free and wholly equal, as well as wise, happy and just. Only one social movement was bold enough to render this assumption quite explicit and accept its consequences, that of the anarchists. But all forms of liberalism founded on rationalist metaphysics are less or more watered down versions of this creed.

And how are men to be made rational on these lines? They must be educated, by men endowed with reason. But being uneducated, how can they be expected to understand or cooperate with the purposes of their educators? 'Education', says Fichte, [must inevitably work in such a way that] 'you will later recognise the reasons for what I am doing now.' Children cannot be expected to understand why they are compelled to go to school; in their case, 'Compulsion is also a kind of education.' If you [196] cannot understand your true interests as a rational being, I cannot be expected to consult you or abide by your wishes in the course of making you rational. I force you to be protected against smallpox though you may not wish it. The sage knows you better than you know yourself, for you are the victim of your passions, a slave living a heteronomous life, purblind, unable to understand your goals. You want to be a human being. It is the aim of the State to satisfy your wish. 'Compulsion is justified by education for future insight.'

How am I to educate you? Just as the reason within me, if it is to triumph, must suppress my lower instincts, so (the fatal transition from individual to social concepts is almost imperceptible, yet this is where the crucial argument comes) the higher elements in society, those who 'possess the highest insight of their time and people', must exercise compulsion to rationalise the irrational section of society; for, so Hegel, Bradley, Bosanquet have often assured us, by obeying the rational man we obey ourselves, not indeed as we are in our ignorance and our passions, wards who need a guardian, but as we could be if we listened to the reason within us.

And, pursuing the same line of reasoning, if I break away from the teleological schema of the Hegelians towards some more voluntarist philosophy, may I not conceive the idea of imposing on my society – always for its own betterment – a plan of my own which in my rational wisdom I have elaborated, which unless I act on my own, and perhaps against its wishes, [197] may never come

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to fruition at all? Or, abandoning the concept of reason altogether, I may conceive myself as an inspired artist who moulds men into patterns in the light of his unique vision, as painters combine colours or composers sounds. Humanity is the raw material on which I impose my creative will; even though men suffer and die in the process, they are lifted by it to a height to which they could never have risen without my coercive but creative violation of their lives.

This is the argument used by every dictator, inquisitor and bully who seeks some moral or even aesthetic justification for his conduct. I must do for men, or with them, what they cannot do for themselves, and I cannot ask their permission or consent because they are in no condition to know what is best for them, and what they will permit and consent to may mean their suicide. The hero may be a rationalist sage, or Napoleon, or a romantic authoritarian who believes in the possibility of creating a race of supermen, as some Fascist leaders claim to do.

Provided that we allow that there is a solution to the social problem, and that they may know it and we do not, then we may with Auguste Comte ask why, if we do not allow free thinking in chemistry or biology, we should allow it in morals or politics. Why indeed? If there is a chosen method which reveals the truth, there is no case for freedom of opinion or action, at least as an end in itself; no case for conduct unauthorised by the relevant experts. [198] The immature and untutored must be made to say to themselves, 'Only the truth liberates, and the only way in which I can learn the truth is by doing blindly today what you who know it order me, or if need be coerce me, to do, in the conviction that only thus will I arrive at your clear vision and be free like you.' For why should demonstrable error be tolerated?

We seem to have wandered far from our liberal beginnings. The authoritarian argument employed by Fichte and Hegel, and after them by other defenders of authority from Marx and the positivists to the latest nationalist or Communist dictator, is precisely what the Stoic and Kantian ethics protests against in the name of the inner reason of the free individual following his own light as best he can. In this way the rationalist argument, with its assumption of the single true solution, leads from an unpolitical doctrine of individual self-perfection to an authoritarian State obedient to the directives of a Platonic elite.

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What can have led to so strange a reversal, the transformation of Kant's individualism into something close to a pure totalitarian doctrine? This question is not of mere historical interest, for many contemporary liberals have gone through the same peculiar evolution. It is true that Kant insisted, following Rousseau, that all men possessed a capacity for rational self-direction, that there could be no experts in moral matters, for it was not a matter of knowledge, as the Utilitarians maintained, but of the correct use of an inborn faculty; and that what made men free was not acting in certain self-improving ways – which they could be coerced to do – but knowing why they ought to do so, which nobody could do for or on behalf of anyone else. But even Kant, when he came to deal with political issues, said that no law, provided it was such that I should if I were asked approve it as a rational being, could possibly deprive me of my liberty.

With this the door is opened wide to the rule of experts. I can't consult all men about all enactments all the time. The government cannot be a continuous plebiscite. Moreover some men are not as well attuned to the voice [199] of their own reason as others: some are singularly deaf. If I am a legislator or a ruler, I must assume that, if the law I impose is rational, and I can only consult my own reason, it will automatically be approved by all the members of my society qua rational beings. If they disapprove they must pro tanto be irrational, and therefore need to be repressed by reason, whether their own or mine can't matter greatly, for the pronouncements of reason must be the same in all minds.

Next record.

I issue my orders and, if you resist, take it on myself to repress the irrational element in you which opposes reason. My task would be easier if you repressed it in yourself. I try to educate you to do so. But I am responsible for public welfare, and I cannot wait until all men are wholly rational. Kant may protest that the essence of the subject's freedom is that he and he alone has given himself the order to obey, but this is a counsel of perfection. If you fail to discipline yourself, I must do so for you and you can't complain of lack of freedom, for the fact that you've had to be coerced is merely evidence that you haven't listened to your own inner reason, that you are like a child or a savage, not ripe for self-

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direction; and [200]<sup>1</sup> if this leads to despotism of the best or the wisest, which is then identified with freedom, can it be that there is something gravely amiss in the premisses of the argument? Can it be that the basic assumptions are themselves somewhere at fault?

Let me recapitulate them. They are: that all men have one purpose and one only, that of rational self-direction; that the ends of all rational beings must necessarily fit into a single universal harmonious pattern, which the sage discerns more clearly than the ignoramus; that all conflict, and consequently all tragedy, is due solely to the clash of reason with the insufficiently rational, the immature and undeveloped elements in life, and that such clashes are in principle avoidable and for rational beings are quite impossible; so that, when all men have been made rational, they will obey the rational laws of their own rational nature, which is one and the same in them all. Can it be that not one of these basic assumptions is demonstrable or perhaps even true?

Next section or whatever it is.

[VI

*The search for status]*

[207] No doubt every interpretation of the word 'liberty' must include a minimum of what I have called negative liberty, that is, an area within which my wishes are not frustrated. No society literally suppresses all the liberties of all its members. A being who is prevented by others from doing anything at all that he wishes to do is not a moral agent at all and could not either legally or morally be regarded as a human being, even if a physiologist or even a psychologist felt inclined to classify him as a man. But Mill and Constant, the fathers of liberalism, want more than this minimum: they want a maximum degree of non-interference compatible with the minimum demands of social life.

It seems unlikely that this demand has ever been made by any but a small minority of highly civilised human beings. The bulk of humanity has certainly been prepared to sacrifice it to other goals: security, prosperity, power, virtue, rewards in the next world, and indeed justice and equality and fraternity, and many other values that do not appear to need negative liberty as a precondition for

<sup>1</sup> [New paragraph begins in L.]

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their own realisation. It is not a demand for *Lebensraum* for the individual which has stimulated the wars of liberation for which men were ready to die in the past, or indeed in the present. Men who have fought for freedom have commonly fought for the right to be governed by themselves or their representatives, sternly if need be, like the Spartans, with little individual liberty, but in the manner that let them participate, or at least think that they were participating, in the administration of their collective lives – even revolutionaries who have destroyed governments, and done so as a rule in order to establish the rights of a given group of believers in some doctrine, or of a class, or of some other body of men which certainly frustrated those whom they ousted, and sometimes displaced or suppressed vast numbers of human beings. And although such revolutionaries have sometimes argued that the liberty for which they stood [208] was liberty for all, or at least for the ‘real selves’ of all those who truly understood that liberty was a triumph of their class or order, [this] has little to do with Mill’s notion of liberty as limited only by the danger of doing harm to others.

It is the non-recognition of this political fact that has perhaps blinded some contemporary liberals to the world in which they live: their plea is clear, their case is just, but they do not allow for the variety of human wishes, nor yet for the ingenuity with which men can prove to their own satisfaction that the fulfilment of one wish is also the fulfilment of its contrary.

[VII

*Liberty and sovereignty]*

The French Revolution, at least in its Jacobin form, was just such an eruption of the desire for [the] positive freedom of collective self-direction on the part of a large body of Frenchmen who felt liberated as a nation, even though the result was a severe restriction of individual freedoms. The liberals of the first half of the nineteenth century correctly foresaw that liberty in this positive sense could, especially in its socialised form, easily destroy all liberty in the negative sense, which they held sacred – the protection of the individual from controlled interference and social pressure, to live his life as far as possible as he pleased – and pointed out again and again that sovereignty of the people could

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easily destroy that of individuals. Mill explained patiently and unanswerably that democratic self-government wasn't in his sense necessarily freedom at all. For those who govern aren't necessarily the same people as those who are governed, and self-government isn't government of each by himself, but at best of each by the [209] rest. He spoke of the tyranny of the majority and of the tyranny of the prevailing feeling and opinion, and saw not much difference between that and any other kind of tyranny which encroaches on men's activities beyond the sacred frontiers of private life.

But no one saw the conflict between the two types of liberty better than Benjamin Constant. He pointed out that transference of unlimited authority, usually called sovereignty, from one set of hands to another doesn't increase liberty but merely shifts the burden of slavery. He asked why a man should care whether he is crushed by a popular government or a monarch, or even by a set of laws. He saw that the problem for those who want negative, that is to say individual, freedom is not who uses this authority but how much authority should be placed in any set of hands. He maintained that usually men protest against this or that set of governors as being oppressive, but that the real cause of oppression lies in the mere fact of the accumulation of power itself, wherever it may happen to be centralised; that liberty is endangered by the mere existence of absolute authority as such. 'It is not against the arm that one must rail, but against the weapon. Some weights are too heavy for the human hand.' Democracy may disarm a given oligarchic class, a given privileged individual, but it can still crush individuals as much as any previous ruler. Equality of the right to oppress is not equivalent to liberty, nor does universal consent to loss of liberty somehow miraculously preserve it merely by being universal or being consent. If I consent to be oppressed, am I the less oppressed? If I sell myself into slavery am I the less a slave? If I commit suicide am I the less dead because I have taken my own life freely?

[210] I may of course prefer to be deprived of my liberties by an assembly in which I am a perpetual minority. It may give me an opportunity one day of persuading others to do for me that to which I feel I am entitled; but to be deprived of my liberty at the hands of a majority deprives me of it just as effectively. Hobbes was at any rate more honest: he didn't pretend that a sovereign

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doesn't enslave, he justifies slavery, but at least he didn't call it freedom.

Throughout the nineteenth century liberal thinkers repeated over and over again that, if by 'liberty' was meant a limit on the powers of any man to force me to do what I didn't want to do or to refrain from doing what I did wish to do, then whatever the name in which I was being coerced – reason or the State, my own good, the good of unborn generations, God or man, progress or nation, history or class, the rights of a great leader to mould inferior beings to his own pattern and raise him to a higher level of consciousness – whatever the ideal, I was not free, and the doctrine of absolute sovereignty must be declared to be a tyrannical doctrine in itself. If I wish to preserve my liberty it is certainly not enough to say that it must not be violated unless someone or other – the sovereign, or the popular assembly, or the King in parliament, or the judges, or all these persons together, or even the laws themselves (for the laws may be very oppressive) – authorises this. I must establish a society in which there must be some interferences which nobody should ever be permitted to authorise.

I may call such frontiers natural rights, or the word of God, or natural law, or the demands of utility, or the deepest interests of man. I may believe in their validity a priori, or assert them as my own subjective ends, or the ends of my society or civilisation. What would be common to all these cases is that the rules in question are accepted so widely and grounded so deeply in the actual nature of men as to be by now an essential part of what we mean by being human; with the corollary that those who don't in practice take at any rate some of these rules for granted – can break them without a qualm – are so different from me in their view of what men and human relationships are that I look on them as being abnormal, morally deficient, beyond the range of normal human communication. Certainly democracy entails no protection for human rights in that sense, for it is notorious that few governments have found much difficulty in causing their subjects to generate the will that the government wanted: 'The triumph of despotism is to force the slaves to declare themselves free.' Perhaps the chief value for liberals of political – positive – rights, namely participation in the government, is as a means for

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protecting what they hold to be ultimate, negative, individual liberty.

[But if democracies can, without ceasing to be democratic, suppress freedom, at least as liberals have used the word, what would] make a society ‘negatively’ free? For Mill, Constant, Tocqueville and the tradition to which they belong, no society is free unless it is governed by at least two interconnected principles: first, that no power, but only rights, is absolute, so that all men, whatever power governs them, [have an absolute right to refuse to behave inhumanely; and second, that there are frontiers, not artificially drawn, within which men must be inviolable, these frontiers being defined in terms of rules so long and widely accepted that their observance has entered into the very conception of what it is to be a normal human being (and therefore, also, of what it is to act barbarously or inhumanely); rules of which it would be absurd to say, for example, that they could be abrogated by some formal procedure on the part of some court or sovereign body.

It is such rules as these that are broken when a man is punished without being proved guilty; when] men are tortured or murdered indiscriminately by the arbitrary will of a despot; when children are compelled to denounce their parents or men to betray one another, or minorities are massacred merely for being minorities. Such acts, even if they are legalised by the sovereign – Robespierre or Lenin or Hitler [or] many a later government – cause horror [even in these days,] and this springs from the recognition of the moral validity, irrespective of the laws, of some absolute barriers to the imposition of one man’s will on another. The freedom of a society or a class or group, in this sense of freedom, is measured by the strength of these barriers, and the number and importance of the paths which they keep open for their members, if not for all, anyhow for a large number of them. What makes a country free is not necessarily that the sovereign is restrained by formal rules, legal or moral or constitutional. It is clear, for instance, that England is free despite the existence in it, at least in theory, of a sovereign. The reason for this is that this omnipotent entity is restrained by custom or opinion. What matters is not the form of the restraint, but its effectiveness.

[212] This is almost at the opposite pole from the purposes of those who believe in liberty in the positive, self-directive sense. The former want to curb authority as such. The latter want it

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placed in their own hands. That is the central issue. These are not two different interpretations of a single concept, but two profoundly divergent and irreconcilable attitudes to the ends of life. It is as well to recognise this, even if it is in practice necessary to strike a compromise between them. For each of them makes absolute claims. These claims cannot both be fully satisfied by the same persons in the same place at the same time. But it is a profound lack of social and moral understanding not to recognise that each is an ultimate value which, both historically and morally, has an equal right to be classed among the deepest interests of mankind.

New Section.

[VIII

*The One and the Many]*

In the end, what is responsible for the crushing of human beings in the name of great ideals such as happiness or justice or progress, or the manifest destiny of a nation or race or class, or the demands of their real selves, of which they may not be aware until awakened by a great leader or some unique national experience, finally liberty itself, which demands the sacrifice of individuals for the freedom of society as a whole – what has sanctified all these great altars on which human sacrifices have been brought is the belief that somewhere, in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or in the mind of the individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the simple heart of the uncorrupted good man, there dwells a final solution. It is an ancient belief founded on the assumption that all positive values in which men have believed must in the end be compatible, or perhaps even entail one another.

[213] But is this true? It is a commonplace that political equality is not compatible with more than so much individual liberty, or that equality of liberty is not the same as maximum liberty. We have known that to tell the truth in all circumstances doesn't necessarily conduce to universal happiness, that rigorous justice is compatible neither with generosity nor mercy nor unrestricted freedom. But we shall be told that surely somewhere in some way it must be possible for all these values to live together, for unless

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this is so, the universe is not a cosmos; unless this is so, tragedy must be an intrinsic element in human life. But to say that all conflicts cannot in principle be eliminated is to say that the fulfilment of some of our ideals may in principle make the fulfilment of other ideals impossible; that the notion of total fulfilment is a contradiction, a metaphysical chimera. Every rationalist metaphysician from Plato to the last disciples of Hegel or Marx has maintained or implied that to allow this is crude empiricism, surrender to the forces of darkness, abdication before brute facts, the recognition of things as they are without demanding a rational justification – a conclusion that reason must indignantly reject. And yet it seems no less clear that some positive values are not compatible, that no situation seems conceivable in which truth and happiness, or kindness and justice, or liberty and equality can be guaranteed a priori not to conflict.

For unless we are armed with some a priori guarantee, as some of the philosophers of antiquity thought that they were, of a total harmony of all true values, we are left with nothing but the ordinary resources of empirical observation; and this gives us no warrant for thinking that all good things, or all bad things for that matter, are reconcilable with each other; still less [that] they are all many aspects or modes of a single entity, material or spiritual, in which the appearances, the many, are seen as distortions of the underlying reality of the one. Our everyday means of observation exhibit the world as a field in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, the [214] realisation of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others. Indeed, it is because this is their situation that men place such immense value upon the freedom to choose; for if they had an assurance that in some perfect State realisable by men on earth no ends pursued by them would ever be in conflict, the crucial importance of agony of choice would disappear, and with it the central importance of liberty. If this were true, any method of bringing this final State nearer would then be justified by its purpose, no matter how much freedom were sacrificed in its advance.

It is, I have no doubt, some such a priori belief, whereby all problems are regarded as capable, at least in principle, of some one final universal solution, that has been responsible for the deep, serene, unshakeable conviction in the minds of some of the most merciless tyrants and persecutors in history that what they did was fully justified by its purpose. I do not say that the ideal of self-

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perfection which consciously animated some of these men and their followers is to be condemned as such, or that the language which they used was necessarily the result of a confused or fraudulent use of words, or of a lack of moral or intellectual insight; indeed, I have tried to show that it is the notion of freedom in its positive sense that is generally at the heart of those demands for national or social self-direction which animate the great public movements of our time; that not to recognise this is to remain blind to the most vital facts and ideas of our age. But equally it seems to me that the belief that some single formula can be found which will harmonise the diverse ends of men is false; and that the belief that follows, according to which whatever resists this process should be sacrificed easily as unreal and unworthy, leads to behaviour that is often gratuitously brutal and iniquitous. The need for choice between absolute claims is inevitable, and one of the characteristics that makes human beings human; it is this that gives its value to freedom as an end in itself, and not as a temporary need arising out of our disordered lives, a predicament which some panacea may presently put right.

[215] No doubt the extent of a man's or people's liberty to choose must be weighed against the claims of other values. Moreover, as we are rightly reminded by Mr Tawney, freedom for the pike is death for the minnows; liberty for the strong, whether their strength is physical or economic, must be restrained. We respect this principle because the other principles, justice or equality, are as basic in men as a desire for liberty. The need to balance and compromise, the certainty that we shall never reach wholly clear, wholly certain answers, will madden those who seek for final solutions guaranteed to be eternal.

Nevertheless [216] the 'negative' liberty of those who accept the view that I have urged seems to me to strive for a more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great disciplined authoritarian structures the idea of 'positive' self-mastery by classes or peoples or the whole of mankind. More humane because they destroy less than the system-builders of what most men have found to be indispensable [217] to their life as human beings. It may be that the idea of personal liberty, and of the pluralism of values connected with it, is historically conditioned by capitalist civilisation, which alone gives men possessions and a desire to preserve them; that it is an ideal which remote ages and primitive

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societies haven't known, and one on which posterity will look with interest but little comprehension. Principles are not less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed. It seems to me that no scepticism follows; indeed, the very desire for guarantees that our values are eternal and secure in some objective heaven is perhaps only a metaphysical form of the craving for the certainties of childhood. 'To realise the relative validity of one's convictions', said a distinguished thinker of our time, 'and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian.' That appears to me to be the best statement that has ever been made about the character of our ultimate convictions. To ask for more is perhaps a deep metaphysical need, but to build tactical conclusions on it is a sign of a no less profound moral immaturity.