

TWO CONCEPTS OF LIBERTY

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*Fourth draft (D)*

*For background see [http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published\\_works/tcl/](http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published_works/tcl/)*

[167] Mr Vice-Chancellor, the studies to which the Chichele Chair of Social and Political Theory is dedicated have fallen upon evil days in this country. It is a melancholy fact that in the land that has made so great a contribution to modern political thought, and among a people which still takes a legitimate pride in the names of Hobbes, Locke, Burke, Mill, Green, Bradley, so few men gifted with a capacity for theoretical reasoning should today choose to deal with social or political ideas. I do not know how to explain this phenomenon. It may be that the decline in British power has increased preoccupation with the problems of survival in our country to the neglect of reflection about the ends of life; and without conscious disagreement about what these ends are, political thought, for better or for worse, cannot live. It may be that our philosophers, intoxicated by their achievements in more abstract realms, look with disdain upon a field in which radical discoveries are less likely to be made, and talent for minute analysis is less likely to be rewarded. It may be that the relative stability and the mild climate of our social life – compared with the storms that sweep over our neighbours – are not propitious to the raising of fundamental social and political issues. But whatever the cause political thought as an academic subject is at present a peaceful backwater in English intellectual life.

[167] This is both strange and dangerous. Strange, because there has, perhaps, been no time in modern history when so large a number

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of human beings, both in the East and in the West, have had their notions, and indeed their lives, deeply altered, and in some cases most violently upset, by social and political doctrines which have bound their spell on them. Dangerous, because when ideas are neglected by those who ought to attend to them – that is to say, those who have been trained to think critically about ideas – they sometimes acquire an unchecked momentum, and an irresistible power over multitudes of men that may grow too violent to be affected by rational criticism. Over a hundred years ago the German poet Heine warned the French not to underestimate the power of ideas: philosophical concepts nurtured in the stillness of a professor's study could destroy a civilisation. He spoke of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* as the sword with which civilisation founded on the old metaphysics had been decapitated, and described the works of Rousseau as the bloodstained weapon which, in the hands of Robespierre, had destroyed the old regime; and prophesied that the romantic faith of Fichte and Schelling would one day be turned, with terrible effects, by their fanatical German followers against the liberal culture of the West. The facts have not belied this prediction. If professors can wield this fatal power, it may be that other professors, and they alone, can disarm them.

It is only a very vulgar materialism that denies the great power of ideas, and says that ideals are mere material interests in disguise. It may well be that, without the pressure of social or economic forces, ideas often remain impotent; but what is certain is that these impersonal forces – which after all are nothing other than men working, feeling, striving with and against other men and inanimate nature – do not achieve their full effect save through the medium of ideas, that is to say only when they attain some degree of recognition in human minds. A man's political beliefs or outlook, even in their most practical and applied form, are seldom the fruit of a specialised activity on his part, but are a part of his general awareness of what he is and seeks to be, of his effort to find his place and purpose in the world; and this commonly goes by the name of his philosophy. Despite every effort to separate them conducted [sc. made] by a blind scholastic pedantry, politics has remained indissolubly intertwined with every other form of philosophical activity: more particularly with

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ethics and with every form of thought which enquires about the ends of life and the character and hierarchies of human values. To neglect the field of political thought because its unstable, changing subject matter, with its blurred edges, is not to be caught by the fixed concepts, abstract models and fine instruments suitable to logic, or epistemology or the philosophy of science or linguistic analysis, to demand a unity of method in philosophy, and reject whatever that method cannot successfully manage, is merely to allow oneself, in the field of politics, to remain at the mercy of primitive and uncriticised beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

[168] Political philosophy is a branch of moral philosophy, and consists in the discovery or application of moral notions in the sphere of political relations. It seems to me that unless this truth is grasped, the present condition of our world can scarcely be understood. I do not mean, as I think some idealist philosophers may have meant, that all historical movements or conflicts between human beings are reducible to movements or conflicts of ideas or spiritual forces, nor even that they are all effects (or aspects) of them. But I do mean that to understand such movements and conflicts must be always, in the first place, to understand the clashing ideas and attitudes to life that alone make such movements a part of human history, and not mere natural events.

For this reason the political words that we use today, and the acts we commit, are not wholly intelligible unless we realise that we are living at a time when the world is divided by two systems of political ideas which, although they may share certain common assumptions, are in violent and open conflict over what has long seemed to me the deepest of all political questions, namely 'Why should I (or anyone) obey anyone else?' 'Why should I not do as I wish?' This may not be the most interesting or the most frequently discussed topic of politics, but it is, nevertheless, its central issue. For if we did not live in a world in which it was, at least *prima facie*, desirable that some men should

<sup>1</sup> [Here, as in *Liberty*, I have omitted a dutiful encomium of Berlin's predecessor in his chair, G. D. H. Cole.]

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obey the orders – or yield to the force of authority of others – if we lived in a world in which all men could do whatever they wished without conflict, in a state of harmonious coexistence, or so insulated from each other that no friction between them arose, the problems which give rise to political speculation could scarcely have arisen.

[167] At this point someone may declare that even a wholly harmonious society – a perfect monastic community or a society of saintly anarchists, where no conflicts about ends arise – will still be faced with political problems: questions of which of several possible policies with regard, for instance, to legislation or administration the society is to adopt. But this seems to me a radical mistake. Where ends are agreed, and clashes of ultimate direction – whether on the part of individuals or groups (or classes) – are *ex hypothesi* non-existent, all questions must be those of means. And problems of means are not political but technical – of how best to bring about the agreed purpose – and always capable of being settled in terms of accepted criteria of what is and what is not feasible (as in arguments between experts – engineers or doctors or lawyers). Problems of behaviour become political (or moral) only when there is some collision of purposes or attitudes which cannot be settled by specialists, or the application of technical rules. That is why those who believe that political problems can be totally solved by some device – the moral re-education of mankind; or the triumph of reason, or of enlightened elites; the destruction of capitalism by the proletariat – also hold that the real life of humanity will begin only after that, when all human problems will be soluble by technological means, that is to say, the application of scientific methods. This is the doctrine of Condorcet and Saint-Simon, Marx and Lenin, and is the meaning of the celebrated formula about ‘replacing the government of persons by the administration of things’. This outlook is called utopian by those who think there is something absurd in conceiving a world in which differences between men about ultimate social issues – and therefore political problems – will wholly disappear.

[168] However this may be, it is obvious that no world that we know is harmonious to this degree: that unless some men obey others, the minimum of human organisation on which basic life depends cannot be achieved. Who shall obey whom? And why should they,

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and why do they think that they must obey? And if they disobey, may they be coerced? By whom, and to what degree, and in the name of what, and for the sake of what?

Upon the answers to the central question of the permissible limits of coercion, deeply opposed views are held in vast areas of the world today. The conflict between these views is the most articulate expression of the two systems of life and thought that are embattled against each other at the moment. It seems to me, therefore, that any aspect of this issue is worthy of examination.

#### I

To coerce a man is to deprive him of freedom – freedom from what, or to do what? Almost every moralist in human history has praised freedom. Like happiness and goodness, like nature and reality, its meaning is so porous that there is little interpretation that it can resist. I do not propose to discuss either the history or the more than two hundred senses of this protean word recorded by historians of ideas. I propose to examine no more than two of these senses – but those central ones, with a great deal of human history behind them, and, I dare say, still to come. [169] The first of these political senses of freedom or liberty, which I shall call the negative sense, is involved in the answer to the question ‘What is the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he wants to do or be, without interference by other persons?’ The second, which I shall call the positive sense, is involved in answer to the question ‘What or who is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do or be one thing rather than another?’ The two questions are clearly different, even though the answers to them may overlap.

##### 1. *The notion of ‘negative’ freedom*

I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no human being interferes with my activity. This is the sense of liberty in which the

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classical English political thinkers, Hobbes, Locke, Paine, Bentham and John Stuart Mill often used it.<sup>2</sup> Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can do what he wants. If I am prevented by other persons from doing what I want, I am to that degree unfree; and if the area within which I can do what I want is contracted by other men beyond a certain minimum, I can be described as being coerced or, it may be, enslaved.

Coercion is not, however, a term that covers every form of inability. If I say that I am unable to jump more than ten feet in the air, or cannot read because I am blind, or cannot understand the darker pages of Hegel, it would be eccentric to say that I am to that degree enslaved or coerced. Coercion implies the deliberate interference of other human beings within the area in which I wish to act. If a man is described as being a slave to his passions there is a feeling that the word is being used in a legitimate and normal but somewhat metaphorical sense. Certainly there is a non-metaphysical sense in which he is not free. But, whatever the analysis of this sense, it is not primarily social or political: a man who is a slave to his passions is a slave in some sense very different from that in which Uncle Tom was a slave to Simon Legree. Uncle Tom was a slave because he was coerced by another human being to be or do what he would otherwise not have wanted or decided to be or do. To be prevented from obtaining what you desire may perhaps, in some cases, be described as a lack of freedom. But you lack political liberty or freedom (I use these terms interchangeably) only if you are prevented from attaining your goal by human beings.<sup>3</sup> Mere incapacity to attain your goal is not lack of political freedom.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> 'A free man said Hobbes, 'is he that [...] is not hindered to do what he has a will to.' Law is always a 'fetter' [*De cive*, chapter 14], even if it protects you from being bound in chains that are heavier than those of the law, say, arbitrary despotism or chaos. Bentham says much the same.

<sup>3</sup> I do not, of course, mean to imply the truth of the converse.

<sup>4</sup> Helvetius made this point very clearly: 'The free man is the man who is not in irons, not imprisoned in a gaol, nor terrorised like a slave by the fear of punishment.' It is not lack of freedom not to fly like an eagle or swim like a whale or be a king or a pope or an emperor.

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This is brought about by the use of such current expressions as ‘economic freedom’ and its counterpart, ‘economic slavery’. It is argued, very plausibly, that if a man is too poor to afford something on which there is no legal ban – a loaf of bread, a box at the opera, recourse to the law courts – he is as little free to have it as he would be if it were [170] forbidden him by law. If my poverty were a kind of disease, which prevented me from buying bread or paying for the box at the opera, or getting my case heard, as a cataract prevents me from seeing, this inability would not naturally be described as a lack of freedom at all, least of all political freedom. It is only because I believe that my inability to get what I want is due to the fact that other human beings have made arrangements whereby I am prevented from having enough money with which to pay for it that I think myself a victim of coercion or slavery. In other words, this use of the term depends on a particular social and economic theory about the causes of my poverty or weakness. If my lack of means is due to my stupidity or bad luck, or the unintentional effect of social or political institutions, which favours others more, then I speak of lacking freedom (and not simply lack of economic means) only if I accept the theory.<sup>5</sup> If I believe that I am being kept in want by a plan on the part of other human beings which I consider unjust or unfair, I speak of economic slavery or oppression. The nature of things does not madden us, only ill will does, said Rousseau. The criterion is the part that I believe to be played by other human beings, directly or indirectly, in frustrating my wishes. By being free in this sense I mean I am not being interfered with by others. The wider the area of non-interference the wider my freedom.

This is certainly what the classical English philosophers meant when they used this word. They disagreed about how wide the area could or should be. They supposed that it could not, as things were, be unlimited, because if it were, it would entail a State in which all men could interfere without limit with all other men; and this kind of

<sup>5</sup> The Marxist conception of social laws is, of course, the best-known version of this theory.

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'natural' freedom would lead to social chaos, in which men's minimum needs would not be satisfied; or else the liberties of the weak would be suppressed by the strong. [171] And since they perceived that human purposes and activities do not automatically harmonise with one another; and, because (whatever their official doctrines) they put high value on other goals such as justice or happiness, or security or varying degrees of equality, they were prepared to curtail freedom in the interests of other values and, indeed, of freedom itself. For without this it was impossible to create the kind of association that they thought desirable.

Consequently it is assumed by these thinkers that the area of men's free action must be limited by law. But equally it is assumed (especially by such libertarians as Locke and Mill in England, and Constant and Tocqueville in France) that there ought to exist a certain minimum area of personal freedom which must on no account be violated, for if it is overstepped, the individual will find himself in an area too narrow for even that minimum development of his natural faculties which alone gives such value as they have to the various ends which men hold good or right or sacred. It follows that a frontier must be drawn between the area of private life and that of public authority. Where it is to be drawn is a matter of argument, indeed of haggling. Men are largely interdependent and no man's activity is so completely private as never to affect the lives of others in any way. The liberty of some must depend on the restraint of others. Still, a practical solution has to be found.

Philosophers with an optimistic view of human nature, and a belief in the possibility of harmonising human interests, such as Locke or Adam Smith, and, in some moods, Mill, believed that social harmony and progress were compatible with reserving a large area for private life into which neither the State nor any other authority must be allowed to encroach. Hobbes and those who agreed with him, especially conservative or reactionary thinkers, argued that if men were to be prevented from cutting each other's throats, and making social life a jungle or a wilderness, greater safeguards must be instituted to keep them in their places, and wished correspondingly to increase the area of centralised control and decrease that of the individual. But both sides agreed that some portion of human existence must remain



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independent of the sphere of social control. To invade that preserve, however small, would be despotism. The most eloquent of all defenders of freedom and privacy, Benjamin Constant, who had not forgotten the Jacobin dictatorship, declared that at the very least the liberty of religion, opinion, expression, property must be guaranteed against arbitrary invasion. Jefferson, Burke, Paine, Mill compiled different catalogues of individual liberties, but the argument for keeping authority at bay is always substantially the same. We must preserve a minimum area of personal freedom if we are not to 'degrade or deny our nature'. No doubt we cannot remain absolutely free, and must give up some of our liberty to preserve the rest. But total self-surrender is self-defeating.

What then must the minimum be? That which a man cannot give up without offending against the essence of his human nature. What is this essence? What are the standards which it entails? This has been, and perhaps always will be, a matter of infinite debate. But whatever the principle in terms of which the area of non-interference is to be drawn, whether it is that of natural law or [174] natural rights, or of utility or the pronouncements of a categorical imperative, or the sanctity of the social contract, or any other concept with which men have sought to clarify and justify their convictions, liberty in this sense means liberty *from*; absence of interference beyond a certain frontier.

'The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way', said the most celebrated of its champions. Is compulsion ever justified? Mill had no doubt that it was. Since justice demands that all individuals be entitled to a minimum of freedom, all other individuals were of necessity to be restrained, if need be by force, from depriving anyone of it. Indeed the whole function of law was the prevention of just such collisions: the State was reduced to what Lassalle contemptuously described as the functions of a nightwatchman or traffic policeman.

What made this protection of individual liberty so sacred to Mill? In his famous essay he declares that unless men are left to live as they wish 'in the part [of their conduct] which merely concerns [themselves]', civilisation cannot advance; the truth will not, for lack of

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a free market in ideas, come to light; there will be no scope for spontaneity, originality, genius, for mental energy, for moral courage. Society will be crushed by the weight of 'collective mediocrity'. Whatever is rich and diversified will be crushed by the weight of custom, by men's tendency to conformity, which breeds only 'withered' capacities, 'pinched and hidebound', 'cramped and dwarfed' human beings. 'Pagan self-assertion' is as worthy as 'Christian self-denial'. All the errors which [a man] is likely to commit against advice and warning are far outweighed by the evil of allowing others to constrain him to what they deem his good.' The defence of liberty consists in the 'negative' goal of warding off interference. To threaten a man with persecution unless he submits to a life in which he exercises no choices of his goals; to block before him every door but one, no matter how noble the prospect upon which it opens, or how benevolent the motives of those who arrange this, is to sin against the truth that he is a man, that is, a being with a life of his own to live. [175] This is the idea of liberty as it has been conceived by liberals in the modern world from the days of Erasmus (some would say of Occam) to our own. Every plea for civil liberty and individual rights, every protest against exploitation and humiliation, against the encroachment of public authority or the mass hypnosis of custom or organised propaganda, springs from this individualistic, and much disputed, conception of man.

Three aspects of this position may be noted.

In the first place Mill confuses two distinct notions. One is that all coercion is, in so far as it frustrates human desires, bad as such, although it may have to be applied to prevent other, greater, evils; while non-interference, which is the opposite of coercion, is good as such, although it is not the only good. This is the 'negative' conception of liberty in its classical form. The other is that men should seek to develop a certain type of character, of which Mill approved – original, imaginative, independent, non-conforming to the point of eccentricity, etc., and that such a character can be bred only in conditions of liberty.

Both these are liberal views, but they are not identical, and the connection between them is, at best, empirical. No one would argue that freedom of self-expression could flourish where dogma crushes

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all thought. But if the thesis urged by James Stephen in his formidable attack on Mill in his *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, that independence and fiery individualism grow at least as often in such conditions of severe repression as, for example, prevailed among the puritan Calvinists in Scotland or New England as in more liberal climates (say in Scandinavia or modern Switzerland) were accepted, Mill's argument for liberty as a necessary condition for the growth of human genius would fall to the ground. If his two goals proved incompatible, Mill would be faced with a cruel dilemma, quite apart from the further difficulties created by the inconsistency of his doctrines with strict utilitarianism, even in his own humane version of it.<sup>6</sup>

In the second place the doctrine is comparatively modern. There seems to be scarcely any consciousness of individual liberty as a political ideal in the ancient world. Condorcet has already remarked that the notion of individual rights is absent from the legal conceptions of the Romans and Greeks; this seems to hold equally of the Jewish, Chinese and all other ancient civilisations that have since come to light.<sup>7</sup> The domination of this ideal has been the exception rather than the rule, even in the recent history of the West. Nor has liberty in this sense often formed a rallying cry for the great masses of mankind. The desire not to be impinged upon, not to be dictated to, to be left to oneself, has been a mark of high civilisation both on the part of individuals and communities. The desire to be left to live one's life as one chooses, the sense of privacy itself, of the area of personal

<sup>6</sup> This is but another illustration of the natural tendency of all but a very few thinkers to believe that all things they hold good must be intimately connected, or at least compatible with one another. The history of thought, like the history of nations, is strewn with examples of inconsistent, or at least disparate, elements artificially yoked together in a despotic system, or held together by the danger of some common enemy. In due course the danger passes, and conflicts between the allies arise, which often disrupt the system, sometimes to the great benefit of mankind.

<sup>7</sup> See the valuable discussion of this in Michel Villey, *Leçons de l'histoire de la philosophie du droit*, who traces the embryo of the notion of subjective rights to Occam.

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relationships as something sacred in its own right derives from a conception of freedom which, for all its religious roots, is scarcely older, in its developed state, than the Renaissance or the Reformation.<sup>8</sup> Yet its decline would mark the death of civilisation, an entire moral outlook.

The third characteristic of this notion of liberty is of far greater importance. It is that liberty in this sense is not compatible with some kind of autocracy, or at any rate with the absence of self-government. Liberty in this sense is principally concerned with the area of control, not with its source. Just as democracy may, in fact, deprive the individual citizen of a great many liberties which he might have in some other form of society, so it is perfectly conceivable that a liberal-minded despot would allow his subjects a large measure of personal freedom. The despot who leaves his subjects a wide area of liberty may be unjust, or encourage the wildest inequalities, care for little order, or virtue, or knowledge; but provided he does not curb their liberty, or at least curbs it less than many other regimes, he meets with Mill's specification.<sup>9</sup>

[177] Freedom in this sense is not, at any rate logically, connected with democracy or self-government. Self-government may, on the whole provide a better guarantee of the preservation of civil liberties than other regimes, and has been defended as such by libertarians. But there is no necessary connection between individual liberty and democratic rule. The answer to the question 'Who governs me?' is logically distinct from the question 'How far does government interfere with me?' It is in this difference that the great contrast between the two concepts of negative and positive liberty, in the end,

<sup>8</sup> Christian (or Jewish) belief in the absolute authority of either divine or natural laws, or in the equality of all men in the sight of God, is very different from belief in freedom to live as one thinks good.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it is arguable that in the Prussia of Frederick the Great or in the Austria of Joseph II men of imagination, originality and creative genius, of a kind which Mill desired to encourage, and minorities of all kinds, were less persecuted and felt the pressure, both of institutions and custom, far less heavy upon them than in many an earlier or later democracy.

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consists.<sup>10</sup> For the ‘positive’ sense of liberty comes to light if we try to answer the question, not ‘What am I free to do or be?’, but ‘By whom

<sup>10</sup> [177] ‘Negative liberty’ is something the extent of which, in a given case, it is difficult to estimate. It might prima facie seem to depend simply on the power to choose between at any rate two alternatives. Nevertheless, not all choices are equally free, or free at all. If in a totalitarian State I betray my friend under threat of torture, perhaps even if I act from fear of losing my job, I can reasonably say that I did not act freely. Nevertheless, I did, of course, make a choice, and could, at any rate in theory, have chosen to be tortured or dismissed. The mere existence of alternatives is not, therefore, enough to make my action free – although it may be voluntary – in the normal sense of the word. The extent of my freedom seems to depend (*a*) on how many possibilities are open to me (although the method of counting these can never be more than impressionistic: possibilities of action are not discrete entities like apples, which can be exhaustively enumerated); (*b*) how easy or difficult each of these possibilities is to actualise; (*c*) how important in my plan of life, given my character and circumstances, these possibilities are when compared with each other; (*d*) how far they are closed and opened by deliberate human acts; (*e*) what value not merely the agent, but the general sentiment of the society in which he lives, puts on the various possibilities. All these magnitudes must be ‘integrated’, and a conclusion, necessarily never precise or indisputable, drawn from this process. It may well be that there are many incommensurable degrees of freedom, and that they cannot be drawn up on a single scale of magnitude, however conceived. Moreover, in the case of societies, we are faced by such (logically absurd) questions as ‘Would the arrangement X increase the liberty of Mr A more than it would of Messrs B, C and D between them, taken together? The same difficulties arise in applying utilitarian criteria. Nevertheless, provided we do not demand precise measurement, we can give valid reasons for saying that the average subject of the King of Sweden is, on the whole, a good deal freer today than the average citizen of the Republic of Romania. Total patterns of life must be compared directly as wholes, although the method by which we make the comparison, and the truth of the conclusions, is difficult or impossible to demonstrate. But the vagueness of the concepts, and the multiplicity of the criteria involved, is an attribute of the subject matter itself, not of our imperfect methods of measurement, or incapacity for precise thought.

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am I ruled?' or 'Who is to say what I [178] am, and what I am not, to be or do?' The connection between democracy and individual liberty is more tenuous than it seemed to many advocates of both. The desire to be governed by myself, or at any rate to participate in the process by which my life is said to be controlled, may be as basic a wish as that of a free area for action, and perhaps historically older. But it is not a desire for the same thing. So different is it, indeed, as to have led in the end to the great clash of ideologies that dominate our world. For it is this – the 'positive' conception of liberty – not freedom from, but freedom to – which the adherents of the 'negative' notion represent as being, at times, no better than a specious disguise for brutal tyranny.

### II

#### *2. The notion of positive freedom*

The 'positive' sense of the word 'liberty' derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master. I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces, of whatever kind. I wish to be a subject, to be the instrument of my own, not other men's, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes which are my own, and not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside. I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer – deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realising them. This is at least part of what I mean when I say that I am rational, and that it is my reason that distinguishes me as a human being from the rest of the world. I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for his choices and able to explain them by reference to his own ideas and purposes. I feel free to the degree that I believe this to be true, and enslaved to the degree that I am made to realise that it is not.

The freedom which consists in being one's own master, and the freedom which consists in not being prevented from choosing as I do by other men, may, on the face of it, seem at no great distance from each other – no more than a negative and positive way of saying the

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same thing. Yet the 'positive' and 'negative' notions of freedom [179] developed in divergent directions until, in the end, they came into direct conflict with each other.

One way of making this clear is in terms of the independent momentum which the metaphor of self-mastery acquired. 'I am my own master'; 'I am not slave to any man'; but may I not (as, for instance, T. H. Green is always saying) be a slave to nature? Or to my own 'unbridled' passions? Are these not so many species of the identical genus 'slave' – some political or legal, others moral or spiritual? Have not men had the experience of liberating themselves from spiritual slavery, or slavery to nature, and is it not one in which they become aware, on the one hand, of a self which dominates, and, on the other, of something in them which is brought to heel? This dominant self is then variously identified with reason, with my 'higher nature', with the self which calculates and aims at what will satisfy it in the long run, with my 'real' or 'ideal' or 'autonomous' self, or with my self 'at its best'; which is then contrasted with irrational impulse, uncontrolled desires, my 'lower' nature, the pursuit of immediate pleasures, my 'empirical' or 'heteronomous' self, swept by every gust of desire and passion, needing to be rigidly disciplined if it is to rise to the full height of its 'real' nature.

Presently the two selves may be divided by an even larger gap. The real self may be conceived as something wider than the individual (as the term is normally understood), a social 'whole' of which the individual is an element or aspect: a tribe, a race, a Church, a State, the great society of the quick and the dead and the yet unborn. This entity is then identified as being the 'true' self, which by imposing its collective, or 'organic', single will upon its recalcitrant 'members', achieves its own, and therefore their, 'higher' freedom.

The perils of using organic metaphors to justify the coercion of some men by others in order to raise them to a 'higher' level of freedom have often been pointed out. But what gives such plausibility as it has to this kind of language is that we recognise that it is possible, and perhaps at times justifiable, to coerce men in the name of some ideal which they would, if they were more enlightened, themselves

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pursue, but do not, because they are blind or ignorant or corrupt. In other words, it is possible for me to conceive of myself as coercing others for their own sake, perhaps even on their behalf. I am then claiming that I know what they truly need better than they know it themselves. What, at most, this entails is that [180] they would not resist me if they were rational, and as wise as I, and understood their interests as I do. But I may go on to claim a good deal more than this, namely that they are actually aiming at what they consciously resist, because there exists within them an occult entity – their latent rational will, or their ‘true’ purpose – and that this entity, although it is belied by all that they overtly feel and do and say, is their ‘real’ self, of which the poor empirical self in space and time may know nothing or little; and that this inner spirit is the only self that deserves to have its wishes taken into account.

Once I take this view, I am in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress, torture them in the name of their ‘real’ selves, in the secure knowledge that whatever is the true goal of man (happiness, fulfilment of duty, wisdom, a just society, self-fulfilment) must be identical with his freedom – the free choice of his ‘true’, albeit submerged and inarticulate, self.

But this is a paradox which has been often exposed. It is one thing to say that I know, while he himself does not, what is good for X; and even to ignore his wishes for its – and his – sake; and a very different one to say that he has *eo ipso* chosen it, not indeed consciously, not as he is in everyday life, but in his role as a rational self of which the empirical self may not know – a self which discerns the good, and cannot help choosing it when he sees it. This monstrous impersonation, which consists in equating what X would choose if he were something he is not, or not yet, with what X in fact seeks and chooses, is at the heart of all political theories of self-realisation. It is one thing to say that I may be coerced for my own good which I am too blind to see; and another that if it is my good, I am not being coerced, for I have willed it whether I know this or not, and am free even while my poor earthly body or foolish mind bitterly rejects it, and struggles [181] against those who seek to impose it with the greatest desperation.



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This magical transformation (for which William James so justly mocked the Hegelians) can no doubt be perpetrated just as easily with the ‘negative’ concept of freedom, where the self that must not be interfered with is no longer the individual with his actual wishes and needs as they are normally conceived, but the ‘real’ man within, identified with the pursuit of some ideal purpose which his empirical self may never have conceived; and as in the case of the ‘positively’ free self, may grow into some super-personal entity – a State, a class, a nation or the march of history itself – regarded as a more ‘real’ subject of attributes than the empirical self. But the ‘positive’ conception of freedom as self-mastery, with its suggestion of the self divided against itself, lends itself more easily to this splitting of personality into two: the transcendent, dominant controller, and the empirical bundle of desires and passions to be disciplined and brought to heel. This demonstrates (if demonstration of so obvious a truth is needed) that the conception of freedom directly derives from the view that is taken of what constitutes a self, a person, a man. Enough manipulation with the definitions of this last, and freedom can be made to mean whatever the manipulator wishes. Recent history makes it only too clear that the issue is far from being merely academic.

The consequences of distinguishing between two selves will become even clearer if one considers the two major forms which the desire to be self-directed – directed by one’s ‘true’ self – has historically taken: the first that of self-denial in order to attain independence; the second that of total self-identification with a single principle in order to attain the selfsame end.

#### III

##### 1. *The retreat to the inner citadel*

I am the possessor of reason and will; I conceive ends and I desire to pursue them; but if I am prevented from attaining them I no longer feel master of the situation. I may be prevented by the laws [182] of nature – or by accidents, or the activities of men, or the effect, often undesigned, of human institutions. These forces may be too much for

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me. What am I to do to avoid being crushed by them? I must liberate myself from desires that I know I cannot realise. I wish to be master of my kingdom, but my frontiers are long and vulnerable, therefore I contract them in order to reduce or eliminate the vulnerable area. I begin by desiring happiness, or power, or knowledge, or the attainment of some specific object. But I cannot command them. I choose to avoid defeat and waste, and therefore decide to strive for nothing that I cannot be sure to obtain. I determine myself not to desire what is unattainable. The tyrant threatens me with the destruction of my property, with imprisonment, with the exile or death of those I love. But if I no longer feel attached to property, no longer care whether or not I am in prison, if I have killed within myself my natural affections, then he cannot bend me to his will, for all that is left of myself is no longer subject to empirical fears or desires. It is as if I had performed a strategic retreat into an inner citadel – my reason, my soul, my ‘noumenal’ self – which, do what they might, neither external blind force, nor human malice, can touch. I have withdrawn into myself; there, and there alone, I am secure, master of all I possess.

It is as if I were to say: ‘I have a wound in my leg. There are two methods of freeing myself from pain. One is to heal the wound. But if the cure is too difficult or uncertain, there is another method. I can get rid of the wound by cutting off my leg. If I train myself to want nothing to which the possession of my leg is indispensable, I shall not feel the lack of it.’ This is the traditional self-emancipation of ascetics and quietists, of stoics and Buddhist sages, men of various faiths who have fled the world, and equally of individuals dedicated to no religion – men who escape the yoke of society or public opinion by some process of deliberate self-transformation that enables them to care no longer for any of its values, and remain, isolated and independent, fixed on its edges, no longer vulnerable to its weapons.<sup>11</sup> All political isolationism, autarky, every form of autonomy, has in it some element of this attitude. I eliminate the obstacle in my path, by abandoning the

<sup>11</sup> ‘A wise man, though he be a slave, is at liberty, and from this it follows that though a fool rule, he is in slavery’, said St Ambrose. It might equally well have been said by Epictetus or Kant.

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path; I retreat into my own sect, my own planned economy, my own deliberately insulated territory, where no voices from outside need be listened to [183] and no external forces can have effect. This is a form of the search for security, but it has also been called the search for national freedom or independence.

From this doctrine, as it applies to individuals, it is no very great distance to the conceptions of those who, like Kant, identify freedom not indeed with the elimination of desires, but with resistance to them, and with control over them. I identify with the controller and escape the slavery of the controlled. I am free because, and in so far as, I am autonomous. I obey laws, but I have imposed them on, or found them in, myself. Freedom is obedience, but ‘obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves’, and no man can enslave himself. Heteronomy is dependence on outside factors, liability to be a plaything of the external world that I cannot myself fully control, and which pro tanto controls and ‘enslaves’ me. I am free only to the degree to which my person is ‘fettered’ by nothing that obeys laws over which I have no control – my free activity must, therefore, *ex hypothesi*, be lifted above the empirical world of causality. This is not the place in which to discuss the validity of this ancient and famous doctrine; I only wish to remark that the related notions of freedom as resistance to, or escape from, unrealisable desire, and as independence of the sphere of causality, have played a central role in politics no less than ethics.

For if the essence of men is that they are autonomous beings – as authors of values, of ends in themselves the ultimate authority of which consist precisely in the fact that they are willed freely – then nothing is worse than to treat them as if they were not autonomous but natural objects, played on by causal influences, creatures at the mercy of external stimuli, whose choices could be manipulated by their rulers, whether by threats or force or offers of rewards. To treat men in this way is to treat them as if they were not self-determined. ‘Nobody may compel me to be happy in his own way’, said Kant; paternalism is ‘the greatest *despotism* imaginable’. This is so because it is to treat men as if they were not free but human material for me, the

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benevolent reformer, to mould in accordance with my own, not their, freely adopted purpose.

Yet [184] this is precisely the policy that the early utilitarians recommended. Helvétius (and Bentham) believed not in resisting, but in using, men's tendency to be slaves to their passions; they wished to dangle rewards and punishments before men – the acutest possible form of heteronomy – if by this means the 'slaves' might be made happier. But to manipulate men in this sense, to propel them towards goals which you – the social reformer – see, but they may not, is to deny their human essence, to treat them as objects and therefore to degrade them.<sup>12</sup> That is why to lie to men, or to deceive them, that is to use them as means for my, not their own, independently conceived ends, even if it is for their own benefit, is, in effect, to treat them as subhuman, to behave as if their ends are less ultimate and sacred than my own. In the name of what can I ever be justified in forcing men to do what they have not willed or consented to? Only in the name of some value higher than themselves. But if all values are the creations of men, and called values only so far as they are so, there is no value higher than the individual. Therefore to do this is to coerce men in the name of something less ultimate than themselves – bending them to my will, or to someone else's particular craving for happiness, or expediency, or security, or convenience. I am aiming at something desired by me or my group, to which I am using other men as means. But this is a contradiction of what I know men to be. It is to treat men as things. All forms of tampering with human beings, getting at them, shaping them against their will to your own pattern, all thought-control and conditioning, is, therefore, to deny that in men which makes them men and their values ultimate. Kant's free individual is a transcendent being, beyond the realm of natural causality.

[185] In its empirical form – in which the notion of man is that of ordinary life – this doctrine was the heart of liberal humanism, both

<sup>12</sup> 'Proletarian coercion, in all its forms, from executions to forced labour, is, paradoxical as it may sound, the method of moulding communist humanity out of the human material of the capitalist period.' These lines by the Bolshevik leader Nikolay Bukharin, written in 1920, especially the term 'human material', convey this attitude well.

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moral and political, that was deeply influenced both by Kant and by Rousseau in the eighteenth century. In its a priori form it is a form of secularised Protestant individualism, in which the place of God, and of the individual soul, which strains towards union with Him, is taken by the conception of the rational life and of the individual, endowed with reason, straining to be governed by reason and reason alone, and to depend upon nothing that might deflect or delude him by engaging his irrational nature. Autonomy, not heteronomy: to act and not to be acted upon.

The notion of slavery to the passions is – for those who think in those terms – more than a metaphor. To rid myself of fear, or love, or the desire to conform is to liberate myself from the despotism of something which I cannot control. Cephalus,<sup>13</sup> whom Plato reports as saying that old age alone has liberated him from his passion of love – the yoke of a cruel master – is reporting an experience as real as that of liberation from a human tyrant or slave owner. The psychological experience of observing myself yielding to some ‘lower’ impulse, acting from a motive that I dislike, or of doing something which at the very moment of doing I may detest, and reflecting later that I was ‘not myself’ or ‘not in control of myself’ when I did it, belongs to this way of thinking and speaking. I identify myself with my critical and rational moments. The consequences of my acts cannot matter, for they are not in my control. Only my motives are. This is the creed of the solitary thinker who has defied the world and emancipated himself from the chains of men and things. In this form the doctrine may seem primarily an ethical creed, and scarcely political at all; nevertheless its political implications are clear, and it enters into the tradition of liberal individualism at least as deeply as the ‘negative’ concept of freedom.

It is perhaps worth remarking that in its individualistic form the concept of the rational sage, who has escaped into the inner citadel of his true self, has historically arisen almost always when the external

<sup>13</sup> [In fact in Plato’s *Republic* (book 1, 329c) Cephalus reports Sophocles to this effect. Corrected in later versions.]

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world has proved exceptionally tyrannical, cruel and unjust. 'He is truly free', said Rousseau, 'who desires what he can perform, and does what he desires.' In a world where a man seeking happiness or justice, or freedom (in whatever sense), can 'perform' little because he finds too many avenues of [186] action blocked to him, the temptation to withdraw into himself may become irresistible. It may have been so in Greece, where the Stoic ideal cannot be wholly unconnected with the fall of the independent democracies before centralised Macedonian autocracy. It was certainly so in Rome, for analogous reasons, after the end of the Republic.<sup>14</sup> It arose in Germany in the seventeenth century, the period of the deepest national degradation of the German States that followed the Thirty Years War, when the character of public life, particularly in the small principalities, forced those who prized the dignity of human life, not for the first or last time, into a kind of inner emigration. For the doctrine that maintains that, if I desire what I cannot have, I must teach myself the doctrine that a desire eliminated or successfully resisted is as good as a desire satisfied, is, in the end, a sublime – but unmistakable – form of the doctrine of sour grapes. What I cannot be sure of, I cannot truly want.

It is difficult to see how ascetic self-denial can be called an enlargement of liberty. I save myself from an adversary by retreating indoors and locking every entrance and exit, and I may remain freer than if I had been captured by him, but am I freer than if I had defeated or captured him? And if I go too far, contract myself into too small a space, I shall suffocate and die. The logical culmination of the process of destroying everything through which I can possibly be wounded is suicide. While I exist in the natural [187] world I can never be wholly secure. Total liberation (as Schopenhauer correctly perceived) is conferred only by death.

Those who, at the time, demanded liberty for the individual or for the nation in France did not fall into this attitude, perhaps because,

<sup>14</sup> It is not perhaps far-fetched to assume that the pietism of the Eastern sages was a response to the despotism of the great autocracies, and flourished most at periods when individuals were apt to be humiliated, or at any rate ignored or ruthlessly managed, by those possessed of the instruments of physical coercion.

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despite the despotism of the French monarchy and the arrogance and arbitrary behaviour of privileged groups in the French State, France was a proud and powerful nation, where the reality of political power was not beyond the grasp of men of talent, and where the withdrawal from battle into some untroubled heaven above it, whence it could be surveyed dispassionately by the self-sufficient philosopher, was not the only way out.

I find myself in a world in which I meet with obstacles to my will. Those who are wedded to the ‘negative’ concept of freedom may perhaps be forgiven if they think that the only method of overcoming obstacles is not by self-abnegation, but by removing them: in the case of non-human objects, by physical action; in the case of human resistance, by force or persuasion, as when I induce somebody to make room for me in his carriage, or conquer a country which threatens the interests of my own. Such acts may be unjust, they may involve violence, cruelty and the enslavement of others, but it can scarcely be denied that thereby the agent is able to increase his own freedom. Yet these subjective aims and empirical explanations of their actions are denied by the philosophical, and later the political, adherents of the ‘positive’ conception of freedom. Their view rules over half our world; for this reason alone its metaphysical basis is worth examination.

#### IV

##### [2. *Self-realisation*]

The only true method of attaining freedom, we are told, is by the use of critical reason, the understanding of what is necessary and what is contingent. If I am a schoolboy, all but the simplest truths of mathematics obtrude themselves as obstacles to the free functioning of my mind, as theorems whose necessity I do not understand; they are pronounced to be true by some external authority, and present themselves to me as foreign bodies which I am expected mechanically to absorb into my system. But when I [188] understand the functions of the symbols, the axioms, the formation and transformation rules –

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the logic whereby the conclusions are obtained – and grasp that these things cannot be otherwise, because they appear to follow from the laws that govern the processes of my own reason,<sup>15</sup> then mathematical truths no longer obtrude themselves as external entities forced upon me, which I must receive whether I want to or not, but as something which I now freely will in the course of the natural functioning of my own rational activity. For the mathematician the proof of these theorems is part of the free exercise of his natural logical capacity. To the musician, after he has assimilated the pattern of the composer's score and has made the composer's ends his own, the playing of the music is not obedience to external laws – a compulsion and a barrier to liberty, but a free unimpeded exercise. The player does not feel bound to the score as an ox to the plough or a factory worker to the machine. He has absorbed the score into his own system, has, by understanding it, identified it with himself, has changed it from an impediment to free activity, into an element in that activity itself.

What applies to music or mathematics must, in principle, apply to all other obstacles which present themselves as so many lumps of external stuff blocking free self-development. That is the programme of enlightened rationalism – 'Sapere aude' – from Spinoza to the latest (at times unconscious) disciples of Hegel. What you know, that of which you understand the necessity – the rational necessity – you cannot, while remaining rational, want to be otherwise. For to want something to be other than what it must be is, given the premisses – the necessities that govern the world – to be pro tanto irrational. Ignorance, passion, fear, neuroses, spring from ignorance [*sic*], and take the form of myths and illusions. To be ruled by myths, whether they spring from the wilful activity of wicked charlatans who deceive us in order to exploit us, or from psychological or sociological causes, is a form of heteronomy, of being dominated by outside factors in a direction not necessarily willed by the agent. The enlightened thinkers of the eighteenth century supposed that the study of the sciences of nature, and the creation of sciences of society on the model of natural science, would make the operation of such causes transparently clear,

<sup>15</sup> Or, as some modern theorists maintain, because I have, or could have, invented them for myself, because the rules are man-made.



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and thus enable individuals to [189] recognise their own part in the working of the rational world, irksome only when misunderstood. Knowledge liberates by automatically eliminating irrational fears and desires.

Thus Hegel and Marx substituted their own notions of the laws of social change, but believed, no less than their opponents, that to understand the world is to be freed. They merely differed from them in stressing the part played by change in what made human beings human. To understand the nature of men, the analogy from mathematics or physics was inadequate. One must also understand history, that is, the peculiar laws of continuous growth that govern individuals and groups in their interplay with each other and with nature. Not to grasp this is, according to these thinkers, to fall into a particular kind of error, namely the belief that human nature is static, that its essential properties are the same everywhere and at all times, that it is governed by an unvarying natural law, whether in its theological or materialistic interpretation, and that, consequently, it is, in principle, possible to create a perfectly harmonious society by education and legislation, because the wise, wholly rational man, in all ages and countries, must always demand the same unaltering satisfactions of the same unaltering basic needs. Hegel believed that his contemporaries (and indeed all his predecessors) misunderstood the nature of institutions because they did not understand the laws – the rational laws, since they spring from the operation of human reason – that create and alter institutions and transform human character and human action. Marx and his disciples maintained that the path of human beings was obstructed not only by natural forces or the imperfections of their own character, but even more by the workings of their own social institutions, which they had created (not always consciously) for certain purposes, but whose functioning they came to misunderstand, and which therefore became obstacles in their progress. He offered social and economic hypotheses to account for the inevitability of such misunderstanding, in particular of the illusion that such man-made arrangements were independent forces, as inescapable as the laws of nature. As instances of such pseudo-

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objective forces, he pointed to the laws of supply and demand, or of property, or the eternal division of society into rich and poor, or owners and workers, as so many [190] unaltering human categories. Not until we had reached a stage at which the spells of these illusions could be broken, that is, until we understood that these laws and institutions were themselves the work of human minds and hands, historically needed in their day, and mistaken for inexorable, objective powers, could the old world be destroyed, and more adequate and liberating social machinery substituted.

We are imprisoned by masters – institutions or beliefs or neuroses – which can be removed only by being analysed and understood. We are enslaved by evil spirits which we have ourselves – albeit not consciously – created, and can exorcise them only by becoming conscious and acting accordingly. I am free if, and only if, I plan my life in accordance with my own will; plans entail rules; a rule does not oppress me or enslave me if I impose it on myself consciously, or accept it freely, having understood it, whether it was invented by me or by others, provided that it is rational, that is to say, conforms to the necessities of things. To accept such necessities is to understand why things must be as they must be. To want necessary laws to be other than they are is to be prey to an irrational desire – a desire that what must be X should also be not-X. To believe these laws to be other than they necessarily are is to be insane. That is the metaphysical heart of rationalism. The notion of liberty contained in it is not the ‘negative’ conception of a field without obstacles, a vacuum in which I can do as I please, but the notion of self-direction or self-control. I can do what I will with my own. I am a rational being. Whatever I can demonstrate to myself as being necessary, as incapable of being otherwise in a rational society – that is, in a society directed by rational minds, towards goals such as rational beings might have – I cannot, being rational, wish to sweep out of my way. I assimilate it into my substance as I do the laws of logic, of mathematics, of physics, the rules of art, the principles that govern that of which I understand, and therefore will, the rational purpose, and which I therefore cannot want to be other than it is.

This is the positive doctrine of liberation by reason. Socialised [191] forms of it are at the heart of many of the nationalist, Marxist,

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authoritarian and totalitarian creeds of our day. It may, in the course of its evolution, have left its rational moorings. Nevertheless it is this freedom that, in democracies and in dictatorships, is argued about and fought for in many parts of the earth today. Without attempting to trace the historical evolution of this idea, I should like to comment on some of its vicissitudes.

V

*[The Temple of Sarastro]*

Those who believed in freedom as rational self-direction were bound, sooner or later, to consider how this was to be applied not merely to a man's inner life, but to his relations to other members of his society. Even the most individualistic among them – and Rousseau, Kant and Fichte certainly started as individualists – came at some point to ask themselves whether a rational life not only for the individual, but for society, was possible, and if so, how it was to be achieved. I wish to be free to live as my rational will (my 'real' self) commands, but so must others be. How am I to avoid collisions with their wills? Where is the frontier that lies between my (rationally determined) rights and the identical rights of others? For if I am rational I cannot deny that what is right for me must, for the same reasons, be right for others who are rational like me. A rational (or free) State would be State the laws of which would be such that all rational men would freely accept them, that is, governed by such laws as they would themselves have enacted had they been asked what, as rational beings, they demanded; the frontiers would be such as all rational men would consider to be the right frontiers for rational beings.

But who, in fact, was to determine them? If moral and political problems were genuine – as surely they were – they must be in principle fully soluble; that is to say, there must exist one and only one true solution to any problem, and many false ones; all truths could in principle be discovered by any rational thinkers, and demonstrated so clearly that all other rational men could not but accept them; indeed

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this was largely the case in the new natural sciences. On this assumption, political problems were soluble by [192] establishing a just order that would give to each man all the freedom to which a rational being was entitled. My claim to unfettered freedom can *prima facie* often not be reconciled with your equally unqualified claim; but the rational solution of one problem cannot collide with the equally true solution of another, for two truths cannot logically be incompatible: therefore a just order must in principle be discoverable of which all the rules make possible correct solutions to all possible problems. This ideal, harmonious state of affairs was sometimes imagined as a garden of Eden before the fall of man, from which we were expelled, but for which we are still filled with longing, or as a golden age still before us, in which men, having become rational, will no longer be ‘other-directed’ or frustrate one another.

In existing societies justice and equality are ideals which it is still necessary to obtain with some measure of coercion, because the premature lifting of social controls might lead to the oppression of the weaker and the stupider by the stronger or abler or more energetic and unscrupulous. But it is only irrationality on the part of men (according to this doctrine) that leads them to wish to oppress or exploit or humiliate one another. Rational men will respect the principle of reason in each other, and lack all desire to fight or dominate one another. The desire to dominate is itself a symptom of irrationality, and can be explained and cured by rational methods. Spinoza offers one kind of explanation and remedy, Hegel another, Marx a third. Some of these theories may perhaps, to some degree, supplement each other, others are not combinable. But at any rate they all agree that in a society of perfectly rational beings the lust for domination over men will be absent. The existence of oppression – that is, disharmony – will be the first symptom that the true solution to the problems of social life has not been reached.

This can perhaps be put in another way. Freedom is self-mastery, the elimination of obstacles to my will, whatever these obstacles may be – the resistance of nature, of my own ungoverned passions, of irrational institutions, of the opposing wills of others. Nature I can always, at least in principle, mould by technical means, and impose my will upon it. But how am I to treat recalcitrant human beings? I must,

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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 alone am free, while they are slaves? They will be so if my plan has nothing to do with their wishes or values, [193] only with my own. But if my plan is fully rational, it will allow for the full development of their ‘true’ natures, 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, abilities, aspirations, ends. If I grasp both what these ends and natures are, and how they all relate to one another, I can, at least in principle, if I have the knowledge and the strength, satisfy them all, so long as the nature and the purposes in question are rational. Rationality is knowing things and 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, then there will be no need for coercion; a correctly planned life for all will coincide with full freedom – the freedom of rational self-direction – for all. This will be so if, and only if, the plan is the true plan – the one unique pattern which alone fulfils the claims of reason. Its laws will be the rules which reason prescribes: they will only seem irksome to those whose reason is dormant, who do not understand the true ‘needs’ of their own ‘real’ selves. So long as each player recognises and plays the part set him by reason – the faculty that understands his true nature and discerns his true ends – there can be no conflict. Each man will be a liberated, self-directed actor in the cosmic drama.

Spinoza tells us that children, although they are coerced, are not slaves, because they obey orders given in their own interests, and that the subject of a true commonwealth is no slave, because the common interests must include his own. Similarly Locke says ‘Where there is no law there is no freedom’, because rational laws are directions to a man’s proper interests or ‘general good’; and adds that since such laws are what ‘hedges us from bogs and precipices’ they ‘ill [deserve] the name of confinement’, and speaks of desires to escape from such laws

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as being irrational, forms of 'licence', 'brutish' etc. Montesquieu, forgetting his liberal moments, speaks of political liberty as being not permission to do what we want – or even what the law allows – but only 'the power of doing what we [194] ought to will', which Kant virtually repeats. Burke proclaims the individual's 'right' to be restrained in his own interests because 'the presumed consent of every rational creature is in unison with the predisposed order of things'.

The common assumption of these thinkers (and of many a schoolman before them and Jacobin and Communist after them) 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 cry out against this process. Freedom is not freedom to do what is irrational, or stupid, or bad. To force empirical selves into the right pattern is no tyranny, but liberation.<sup>16</sup>

So, too, Rousseau tells me that if I freely surrender all parts of my life to society, I create an entity which, because it has been built by an equality of sacrifice of all its members, cannot wish to hurt any one of them; for in such a society it can be in nobody's interest to damage anyone else. In giving myself to all, I give myself to no one, and I get back as much as I lose, with enough new force to preserve my new gains. Kant tells me that when 'the individual has entirely abandoned his wild, lawless freedom, to find it again, unimpaired, in a state of dependence according to law', that alone is true freedom, 'for this dependence is the work of my own will acting as a lawgiver'. Liberty, so far from being incompatible with authority, is virtually identical with it. This is the thought and language of both the great Declarations of the Rights of Man and Citizen, [195] and of all those who look upon society as a design constructed according to the rational laws of individuals or nature or history or the Supreme Being. Bentham almost alone doggedly went on repeating that the business

<sup>16</sup> On this Bentham seems to me 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 liberty should be taken away from fools, and wicked persons, because they abuse it?'

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of laws was not to free but to restrain: ‘Every law is an infraction of liberty.’<sup>17</sup>

If the underlying assumptions had been correct – if solutions to social problems resembled solutions to the problems of the natural sciences, and if reason were what rationalists said that it was – all this would perhaps follow. In the ideal case, liberty coincides with law, autonomy with authority. A law which forbids me to do what I could not, as a sane being, conceivably wish to do, is not a restraint of my freedom; such laws would, because I should scarcely be conscious of them, gradually wither away. 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 a rationalist metaphysics are less or more watered-down versions of this creed.

In due course, the thinkers who bent their energies to the solution of the problem on these lines came to be faced with the question of how in practice men were to be made rational in this way. Clearly they must be educated. For only the uneducated are irrational, heteronomous, and need to be coerced, if only to make life tolerable for the rational, if they are to live in the same society with them, and not be compelled to withdraw to a desert or some Olympian height. But the uneducated cannot be expected to understand or co-operate 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, nor the ignorant – that is, for the moment, the majority of mankind – why they are made to obey the laws that will presently make them rational. ‘Compulsion is also a kind of education.’ You learn the great virtue of obedience to superior persons. If you [196] cannot understand your own interests as a

<sup>17</sup> [This sentence appears at the beginning of chapter 10 of Bentham’s *Theory of Legislation*, trans. from the French of Étienne Dumont by R. Hildreth (London, 1871), 48. Dumont constructed this work from Bentham’s manuscripts.]

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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. Even Mill is prepared to say that I may forcibly prevent a man from crossing a bridge if there is not time to warn him that it is about to collapse, for whatever his behaviour may indicate, I know that he cannot wish to fall into the water. Fichte knows what I – the uneducated German of his time – wish to be or do better than I can possibly know them for myself. 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 true goals. You want to be a human being. It is the aim of the State to satisfy your wish. ‘Compulsion’, said Fichte, ‘is justified by education for future insight.’

The reason within me, if it is to triumph, must eliminate and suppress my ‘lower’ instincts, my passions and desires, which render me a slave; similarly (the fatal transition from individual to social concepts is almost imperceptible) the higher elements in society – the better educated, the more rational, those who ‘possess the highest insight of their time and people’ – may exercise compulsion to rationalise the irrational section of society. For, as Hegel, Bradley, Bosanquet have often assured us, by obeying the rational man we obey ourselves – not indeed as we are, sunk in our ignorance and passions, sick creatures afflicted by diseases that need a healer, wards who need a guardian, but as we could be if we were rational, as we could be even now if only we would listen to the rational element which is, *ex hypothesi*, within every human being who deserves the name.

The Hegelian philosophers, from the tough, rigidly centralised, ‘organic’ State of Fichte, to the mild liberalism of T. H. Green, certainly supposed themselves to be fulfilling, and not resisting, the rational demands which, however inchoate, were to be found in the breast of every sentient being. But if I break away from the teleological determinism of the Hegelians towards some more voluntarist philosophy, I may conceive the idea of imposing on my society – for its own betterment – a plan of my own, which in my rational wisdom I have elaborated; and which, unless I act on my own, perhaps against the wishes of the vast majority [197] of my fellow citizens, may never come to fruition at all. Or, abandoning the concept



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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 upon 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 accept may mean their suicide. Let me quote from the true progenitor of the heroic doctrine, Fichte, once again: ‘No one has ... rights against reason’. ‘Man is afraid of subordinating his subjectivity to the laws of reason. He prefers tradition or arbitrariness’. Nevertheless, subordinated he must be. Fichte puts forward the claims of reason, but Napoleon or romantic authoritarians may worship other values: and see in them the only path to ‘true’ freedom.

The same attitude was more pointedly expressed by Auguste Comte who asked why, if we do not allow freethinking in chemistry or biology, we should allow it in morals or politics. Why indeed? If it makes sense to speak of political truths – in the sense of social ends which all men, because they are men, would agree to be such, once they are discovered – and if, as Comte believed, scientific methods will reveal them, then there is no case for freedom of opinion or action – at least as an end in itself – either for individuals or for groups; and indeed no case for any conduct not authorised by appropriate experts. Comte put bluntly what had been implicit in the rationalist theory of politics from its ancient Greek beginnings. There can, in principle, be only one correct way of life. The wise lead it spontaneously, that is why they are called [198] wise. The unwise must be dragged towards it by all the social means in the power of the wise: for why should demonstrable error be tolerated? The immature and untutored must be made to say to themselves: ‘Only the truth liberates, and the only

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way in which I can learn the truth is by doing blindly today what you, who know it, order me, or coerce me, to do, in the conviction that only thus will I arrive at your clear vision, and be free like you.’

We have wandered indeed from our liberal beginnings. This argument, employed by Fichte in his latest phase and by 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 morality protest against most bitterly in the name of the reason of the free individual following his own inner light. In this way the rationalist argument, with its assumption of the single true solution, leads from an ethical doctrine of individual responsibility and individual self-perfection to an authoritarian State obedient to the directives of an elite of Platonic guardians.

What can have led to so strange a reversal – the transformation of Kant’s uncompromising individualism into something close to a pure totalitarian doctrine on the part of thinkers who claimed to be his disciples? This question is not of merely 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 morality was a matter not of specialised knowledge (as the utilitarians and *philosophes* maintained), but of the correct use of a universal human 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, conceded that no law, provided that it was such that I should, if I were asked, approve it as a rational being, could possibly deprive me of any of my rational freedom.

With this the door is opened wide to the rule of experts. I cannot 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: indeed some seem 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 in so far as they are rational beings. For if they disapprove,

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they must, *pro tanto*, be irrational. They therefore need to be repressed by reason: whether their own or mine cannot matter, for the pronouncements of reason must be the same in all minds.

I issue my orders and, if you resist, take it upon 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, 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 cannot complain of lack of freedom, for the fact that you had to be coerced is evidence that you have not listened to your own inner reason, that, like a child, a savage, an idiot, you are not ripe for self-direction or permanently incapable of it.

[200] If this leads to despotism – albeit by the best or the wisest – which is then identified with freedom, can it be that there is something amiss in the premisses of the argument? That the basic assumptions are themselves somewhere at fault? Let us recapitulate them: first, that all men have one purpose, and one only, that of rational self-direction; second, that the ends of all rational beings must of necessity fit into a single universal, harmonious pattern, which the sage discerns more clearly than the ignoramus; third, that all conflict, and consequently all tragedy is due solely to the clash of reason with the irrational, or the insufficiently rational – the immature and undeveloped elements in life – whether individual or communal, and that such clashes are, in principle, avoidable, and for rational beings impossible; finally, that when all men have been made rational, they will obey the rational laws of their own natures, which is one and the same in them all, and so be at once wholly law-abiding and wholly free. Can it be that not one of these basic assumptions is demonstrable, or, perhaps, even true?

VI

*[The search for status]*

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There is another historically important approach to this topic, which, by confounding liberty with her sisters, equality and [201] fraternity, leads to similarly illiberal conclusions. Ever since the issue was raised by Burke and Herder, towards the end of the eighteenth century, it has persistently, and with increasing effect, been asked what is meant by 'an individual'. In so far as I live in society, everything that I do inevitably affects, and is affected by, what others do. Even Mill's strenuous effort to mark the distinction between the spheres of private and social life breaks down under examination. All his critics have pointed out that everything that I do may have results which will harm other human beings. Besides, I am a social being in a deeper sense than that of mere interaction with others. For am I not what I am, to some degree, in virtue of what others think and feel me to be?

When I ask myself what I am, and answer: an Englishman, a Chinese, a merchant, a man of no importance, a millionaire, a convict – I find upon analysis that to possess these attributes entails being recognised as belonging to a particular group or class by other persons in my society, and that this recognition is part of the meaning of the majority of the terms which denote some of my most personal and permanent characteristics. I am not disembodied reason. Nor am I Robinson Crusoe, alone upon his island. It is not only that my material life depends upon interaction with other men, or that I am as I am as a result of social forces, but that some, perhaps all, of my ideas about myself, my sense of my own moral and social identity, are intelligible only in terms of the social network in which I am (the metaphor must not be pressed too far) an element

The lack of freedom about which a man or nation complains is, as often as not, the lack of proper recognition. I may be seeking not for what Mill would wish me to seek, namely, security from coercion, from arbitrary arrest, tyranny, deprivation of certain opportunities of action, or for spaces within which I am legally accountable to no one for my movements. Equally, I may not be seeking for a rational plan of life, or the self-perfection of a dispassionate sage. What I may seek to be saved from is simply being ignored, or patronised or despised, or from being taken too much for granted – in short, from not being treated as an individual, from having my uniqueness insufficiently recognised, from being classed as a member of some featureless

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amalgam, a statistical unit without identifiable, specifically human features of my own. This is the degradation that I am fighting against – not for equality of legal rights, nor for liberty to do as I wish (although I may want these too), but for a condition in which I can feel that I am (because I am treated as being) [202] a responsible agent whose will is taken into consideration as being entitled to it, even if I am attacked and persecuted for being what I am, or choosing as I do.

This is a hankering after status and recognition. ‘The poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he.’ I desire to be understood and recognised, even if this means to be unpopular and disliked. And the only people who can so recognise me, and thereby give me the sense of being someone, are the members of the society to which, historically, morally, economically, and perhaps ethnically, I feel that I belong.<sup>18</sup> My individual self is not something which I can detach from my relationship with others, or from those attributes of myself which consist in their attitude towards me. Consequently, when I demand to be liberated from, let us say, the status of political or social dependency, what I demand is an alteration of status.

What oppressed classes or nationalities as a rule demand is neither simply unhampered liberty of action for their members, nor, in the first place, equality of social or economic opportunity, still less assignment of a place in a frictionless, organic State devised by the

<sup>18</sup> [202] This has an obvious affinity with Kant’s doctrine of human freedom; but it is a socialised and empirical version of it, and therefore almost its opposite. Kant’s free man needs no public recognition for his inner freedom. If he is treated as a means to some external purpose, that is wrong on the part of his exploiters, but his own ‘noumenal’ status is untouched, and he is fully free, and fully a man, in absolute isolation. The need spoken of here is bound up wholly with the relation that I have with others; I am nothing if I am unrecognised; I cannot ignore the attitude of others with Byronic disdain, fully conscious of my own intrinsic worth and vocation, or escape into my inner life, for I am in my own eyes as others see me. I identify myself with the point of view of my milieu. I feel myself to be somebody or nobody in terms of my position and function in the social whole; mine is the most heteronomous condition imaginable.

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rational lawgiver. What they want, as often as not, is simply recognition (of the class or nation, or colour or race) as an [203] independent source of human activity, as an entity with a will of its own, intending to act in accordance with it (whether it is good, or legitimate, or not) and not to be ruled, educated, guided, with however light a hand, as being not quite fully human, and therefore not quite fully free.

This gives a somewhat different sense to Kant's remark that paternalism is 'the greatest *despotism* imaginable'; paternalism is despotic, not because it is more oppressive than naked, brutal, unenlightened tyranny, but because it is an insult to my conception of myself as a human being determined to make my own life in accordance with my own (not necessarily rational or benevolent) purposes, and, above all, entitled to be recognised as such by others. For if I am not so recognised, then I cannot recognise full human attributes in myself: for in large part what I am is determined by what I feel and think; and what I feel and think is determined by the feeling and thought prevailing in the society to which I belong, of which, in Burke's sense, I form not an isolable atom, but an ingredient (to use a perilous but indispensable metaphor) in a social pattern. I may feel unfree in the sense of not being recognised as a self-governing individual human being; but I may feel it also as a member of an unrecognised or insufficiently respected class or nation. Then I wish for the emancipation of my entire class, or nation, or race, or profession. So much can I desire this that I may, in my bitter longing for status, prefer to be bullied and misgoverned by some member of my own oppressed group – by whom I am nevertheless recognised as a man and a rival, that is an equal – to being well and tolerantly treated by someone from some higher and remoter group, who does not recognise me for what I wish to feel myself to be.

This is the heart of the great cry for recognition on the part of both individuals and groups, and, in our own day, of professions and classes, nations and races. Although I may not get 'negative' liberty at the hands of the members of my own society, yet they are members of my own group; they understand me as I understand them; and this understanding creates within me the sense of being somebody in the world. It is this desire for reciprocal recognition that leads the most

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authoritarian of democracies to be, at times, consciously preferred by its members to the most enlightened of oligarchies, or sometimes causes a member of some [204] newly liberated Asian or African State to complain less when he is rudely treated by members of his own race or nation than when he was governed by some cautious, just, gentle, well-meaning administrator from outside. Unless this phenomenon is grasped, the ideals and behaviour of entire peoples who, in Mill's sense of the word, suffer deprivation of elementary human rights, and who, with every appearance of sincerity, speak of enjoying greater liberty than when they possessed a wider measure of these rights, becomes an unintelligible paradox.

Yet it is not with liberty, in either the 'negative' or in the 'positive' sense of the word, that this desire for status and recognition can easily be identified. It is something no less profoundly needed, and passionately fought for, by human beings – something akin to, but not itself freedom: it is solidarity, fraternity, mutual understanding, need for association on equal terms, which is sometimes – but misleadingly – called social freedom. Social and political terms are necessarily vague. The attempt to make the vocabulary of politics too precise may render it useless. But it is no service to the truth to loosen usage beyond necessity. The essence of the notion of liberty both in the 'positive' and the 'negative' senses is the holding off of something or someone, others, who trespass on my field or assert their authority over me, or obsessions, fears, neuroses, irrational forces – intruders and despots of one kind or another. The desire for recognition is a desire for something very different: for union, closer understanding, integration of interests, a life of common dependence and of common sacrifice. It is only the confusion of desire for liberty with this profound and universal craving for status and understanding, further confounded by being identified with the notion of social self-direction, where the self is no longer the individual but the 'social whole', that makes it possible for men, while submitting to the authority of oligarchs or dictators, to claim that this in some sense liberates them.

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Much has been written on the fallacy of regarding social groups as being literally persons or selves whose control and discipline of their members is no more than self-discipline, voluntary self-control which leaves the individual agent free. But even on the 'organic' view, would it be natural or desirable to call the demand for recognition and status a demand for liberty in some third sense? It is true that the group from which recognition is sought [205] must itself have a sufficient measure of 'negative' freedom – otherwise recognition by it will not give the claimant the status he seeks. But the struggle for higher status – the wish to escape from an inferior position – is this to be called a struggle for liberty? Is it mere pedantry to confine this word to the main senses discussed above, or are we, as I suspect, in danger of calling any adjustment of his social situation favoured by a human being an increase of his liberty, and will this not make this term too vague and all-embracing to be useful? And yet we cannot simply dismiss this case as a mere confusion of the notion of freedom with those of status, or solidarity, or fraternity, or equality, or some combination of these. For the craving for status is in certain respects very close to the desire to be an independent agent.

We may refuse this goal the title of liberty; yet it would be a shallow view that assumed that analogies between individuals and groups, or organic metaphors, or several senses of the word 'liberty', are mere fallacies, due either to assertion of likeness between entities in respects in which they are unlike, or of simple semantical confusion. What men want who are prepared to barter their own and others' liberty of individual action for the sake of the status of their group and their own status within the group, is not simply to surrender liberty for security, for some assured place in a harmonious hierarchy, in which all men and all classes know their place, and are prepared to surrender the painful privilege of choosing – 'the burden of freedom' – for the peace and comfort and relative mindlessness of an authoritarian or totalitarian structure. No doubt there are such men and such desires, and no doubt such surrenders of individual liberty can occur, and, indeed, have often occurred. But it is a profound misunderstanding of the temper of our times to assume that this is what makes nationalism or Marxism attractive to nations which have been ruled by foreign masters, or to classes whose lives were directed by other classes in a



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semi-feudal, or some other hierarchically organised, regime. What they desire is more akin to what Mill called ‘pagan self-assertion’, but in a collective, socialised form. Indeed, much of what he says about his own reason for desiring liberty – the value that he puts on craving for non-conformity, on the assertion of the individual’s own values in the face of the prevailing opinion, on bold, self-reliant personalities, on liberation from the leading strings of the official [206] lawgivers and instructors of society – has little enough to do with his conception of freedom as non-interference, but a great deal to do with the desire of men not to have their personalities set at too low a value, assumed to be incapable of autonomous, original, ‘authentic’ behaviour, even if such behaviour is to be met with opprobrium or social restrictions or inhibitive legislation.

This wish to assert the ‘personality’ of my class, or group or nation, is not wholly unrelated to the answer to the question ‘What is to be the area of authority?’ (for the group must not be interfered with by outside masters), and even more with ‘Who is to govern us?’ – govern well or badly, liberally or oppressively, but above all ‘Who?’ And such answers as ‘By representatives elected by my own and others’ untrammelled choice’, or ‘All of us gathered together in regular assemblies’, or ‘The best’, or ‘The wisest’, or ‘The nations as embodied in these or those person or institutions’, or ‘The divine leader’ are answers logically – and often politically and socially too – independent of what extent of ‘negative’ liberty I demand for my own or my group’s activities. Provided the answer to ‘Who shall govern me?’ is somebody or something which I can represent as ‘my own’, as something which belongs to me, or to whom I belong, I can, by using words which convey fraternity and solidarity as well as some part of the connotation of the ‘positive’ sense of the word ‘freedom’, which it is impossible to specify precisely, describe it as a hybrid form of freedom, or at any rate as an ideal which is perhaps more characteristic than any other in the world today, yet one which no existing term seems to fit. Those who sacrifice to it their ‘negative’ Millian freedom, certainly claim to be ‘liberated’ by this means, in this confused, but ardently felt, sense. ‘Whose service is perfect freedom’ can in this way

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be secularised, and the State or the nation or the race, or an assembly, a dictator, my family, or I myself can be substituted for the Deity, without thereby rendering the word 'freedom' wholly meaningless.<sup>19</sup>

[207] No doubt every interpretation of the word 'liberty', however unusual, must include a minimum of what I have called 'negative' liberty. There must be an area within which my wishes are not frustrated. No society literally suppresses all the liberties of 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 a biologist, or even a psychologist, felt inclined to classify him as a man. But the fathers of liberalism – Mill and Constant – want more than the minimum: they demand the maximum degree of non-interference compatible with the minimum demands of social life.

It seems unlikely that this demand for liberty has ever been made by any but a small minority of highly civilised and self-conscious human beings. The bulk of humanity has certainly at most times been prepared to sacrifice this to other goals: security, prosperity, power, virtue, rewards in the next world; or justice, equality, fraternity, and many other values which appear wholly or on part incompatible with the attainment of the greatest degree of individual liberty, and certainly do not need it as a precondition for their own realisation. It is not a demand for *Lebensraum* for each individual that has stimulated the

<sup>19</sup> This argument should be distinguished from the traditional approach of some of the disciples of Burke or Hegel who say that I am made what I am by society or history, and that to escape from them is impossible, and to attempt it irrational. No doubt I cannot leap out of my skin, or breathe outside my proper element; it is a mere tautology to say that I am what I am, and cannot want to be liberated from my essential characteristics, some of which are social. But it does not follow from this that all my attributes are intrinsic and inalienable, and that I cannot seek to alter my status within the 'social network' or 'cosmic web' which determine my nature; if this were the case no meaning could be attached to such words as 'choice' or 'decision' or 'activity'. If they are to mean anything, attempts to protect myself against authority or escape from 'my station and its duties' cannot be excluded as somehow irrational or suicidal. ['My Station and Its Duties' is the title of an essay by F. H. Bradley in his *Ethical Studies* (London, 1876), 145–92.]

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rebellions and wars of liberation in 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 governed, if need be, like the Spartans, with little individual liberty, but in a manner which allowed them to participate, or at any rate to think that they were participating, in the legislation and administration of their collective lives. And men who have made revolutions have, as often as not, meant by liberty no more than the establishment of the rights of a given sect of believers in a doctrine, or of a class, or of some other social group, old or new. This certainly frustrated those whom they ousted – and sometimes displaced, enslaved or suppressed vast numbers of human beings. Yet such revolutionaries have usually felt it necessary to argue that, despite this, they represented the party of liberty, or ‘true’ liberty, by [208] claiming universality for their ideal, which the ‘real selves’ of even those who resisted them were also seeking, although they had lost the way to the goal, or had mistaken the goal itself owing to some moral or spiritual blindness. All 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 (which lurks behind the apparent ambiguity of the term ‘liberty’) 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, like all great revolutions, was, at least in its Jacobin form, 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 the severe restriction of individual freedoms. Rousseau had spoken

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exultantly of the fact that the laws of liberty might prove to be more austere than the yoke of tyranny. For he does not mean by liberty the 'negative' freedom of the individual not to be interfered with within a defined area – he means the sharing by all the fully qualified members of a society of public power, which can interfere with every aspect of every citizen's life. The liberals of the first half of the nineteenth century correctly foresaw that liberty in this 'positive' sense could easily destroy all 'negative' liberty which they held sacred.

They pointed out that sovereignty of the people could easily destroy that of individuals. Mill explained, patiently and unanswerably, that democratic self-government was not, in his sense, necessarily freedom at all. For those who govern are not necessarily the same 'people' as those who are governed, and self-government is not the government 'of each by himself' but, at best, of 'each by all the [209] rest'. He spoke of the tyranny of the majority and of the tyranny of 'the prevailing feeling and opinion', and saw no great difference between that and any other kind of tyranny which encroaches upon men's activities beyond the sacred frontiers of private life.

But no one saw the conflict between the two types of liberty better, or expressed it more clearly, than Benjamin Constant. He pointed out that the transference, say by a successful rising, of unlimited authority, commonly called sovereignty, from one set of hands to another does not increase liberty, but merely shifts the burden of slavery. He reasonably asked why a man should care whether he is crushed by a popular government or by a monarch, or even by a set of laws. He saw that the problem for those who desire 'negative', individual freedom is not who wields this authority, but how much authority should be placed in any set of hands. For unlimited authority in anybody's grasp is bound, sooner or later, to destroy somebody. He maintained that usually men protest against this or that set of governors as 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,' he wrote, 'but against the weapon. Some weights are too heavy for the human hand.' Democracy may disarm a given oligarchic class, a given privileged individual or set of individuals, but

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it can still crush individuals as mercilessly 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 or treat my condition with detachment or irony, 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?

‘Popular government is merely a spasmodic tyranny, monarchy a more centralised despotism.’ Constant saw in Rousseau the worst enemy of individual liberty. He attacked Rousseau’s celebrated thesis that by giving myself to all [210] I give myself to none, by pointing out that, even though the sovereign is ‘everybody’, it may still oppress one of its members. 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 everyone save myself deprives me of it just as effectively. Hobbes was at any rate more honest: he did not pretend that a sovereign does not enslave; he justified this slavery, but at least did not call it freedom.

Throughout the nineteenth century liberal thinkers correctly maintained that if liberty involved a limit upon the powers of any man to force me to do what I did not wish to do, then whatever the ideal in the name of which I was coerced, I was not free; and the doctrine of absolute sovereignty was a tyrannical doctrine in itself. If I wish to preserve my liberty, it is 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 entities taken together, together with the laws themselves – for the laws may be oppressive – authorises its violation. I must establish a society in which there must be some frontiers of freedom which nobody should ever be permitted to cross. Different names or natures may be given to these frontiers: they may be called natural rights or the word of God or natural law or the demands of utility or of the ‘deepest interests of man’; I may believe them to be valid a priori, or assert

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them to be my own subjective ends, or the ends of my society or culture. What they will have in common is that they are drawn in accordance with rules which are accepted so widely and grounded so deeply in the actual nature of men as they have developed through history, as to be, by now, an essential part of what we mean by being human, with the corollary that those who do not in practice take at any rate some of these rules for granted, or break them without a qualm, diverge from me so widely in their conception of what men and human relationships are that I am bound to look upon them as being in extreme cases literally abnormal, morally deficient, beyond the range of normal communication. Genuine belief in the inviolability of a minimum extent of individual liberty entails some such absolute stand. For it is clear that it has little to hope for from democracy, which is logically uncommitted to it, and historically has failed to protect it while remaining faithful to its own principles. For it is plain that few governments, particularly in our day, could find much difficulty in causing their subjects to generate the will – perhaps quite sincerely – that the government wanted. The triumph of despotism is to force the slaves to declare themselves free.<sup>20</sup> The slaves may desire this in perfect good faith: but they remain enslaved. Perhaps the chief value for liberals of political – ‘positive’ – rights, namely that of participating in the government, is as a means for protecting what they hold to be an ultimate value – individual ‘negative’ 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 free? For Mill, Constant, Tocqueville and the liberal tradition to which they belong, no society is free unless it is governed by at any rate two interrelated principles: first, that no power, but only rights,

<sup>20</sup> [This sentence was placed in quotation marks by Berlin, but I have not been able to find a published source for it. It might possibly be a garbled version of Goethe’s ‘Niemand ist mehr Sklave als der sich für frey hält ohne es zu sein’ (‘No one is more enslaved than he who believes that he is free without being so’). *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (Tübingen, 1809) ii 202 (part 2, chapter 5, ‘From Otilie’s Diary’). I am indebted to Jaap Engelsman for this hypothesis.]

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can be regarded as 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 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, 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 one man's will on another. The freedom of a society, or a class or a 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, for at any rate a great number of them.<sup>21</sup>

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 placed in their own hands. That is the cardinal issue. These are not two different interpretations of a single concept, but two profoundly divergent and irreconcilable attitudes to the end of life. It is as well to recognise this, even if it is in practice necessary to strike a compromise between

<sup>21</sup> In Great Britain such legal power is of course vested in the absolute sovereign – the king in Parliament. What makes this country free, therefore, is the fact that this theoretically omnipotent entity is restrained by custom or opinion from behaving as such. It is clear that what matters is not the form of these restrictions on power – whether they are legal, or moral, or constitutional, but their effectiveness. See also 000/0.

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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 classes among the deepest interests of mankind.

## VIII

### [*The One and the Many*]

One belief, more than any other, is responsible for the crushing of human beings in the name of great ideals – human happiness, or a just order, or the progress of civilisation, or the historical mission of a nation or race or class, or even liberty itself, which demands the sacrifice of individuals for the freedom of society. This is the belief that somewhere, in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or the mind of an individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science, or the simple heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a final solution. This ancient faith – for such it is – rests on the conviction that all the positive values in which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible, and perhaps even entail one another. ‘Nature binds truth, happiness and virtue together by an indissoluble chain,’ said one of the best men who ever lived, and spoke in similar terms of liberty, equality and justice.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Condorcet, from whose *Esquisse* these words are quoted, declares that the task of social science is to show ‘by what bonds nature has united the progress of enlightenment with that of liberty, virtue and respect for the natural rights of man; how these ideals, which alone are truly good, yet so often separated from each other that they are even believed to be incompatible, should, on the contrary, become inseparable, as soon as enlightenment has reached a certain level simultaneously among a large number of nations’. He goes on to say that ‘Men still preserve the errors of their childhood, of their country and of their age long after having recognised all the truths needed for destroying them.’ Perhaps, ironically enough, the belief of this most learned, noble, intelligent man in the need and possibility of uniting all good things was just such an error.



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[213] But is this true? It is a commonplace that both political equality and efficient organisation are not, in human society as we know it, compatible with more than a modicum of individual liberty, and certainly not with unrestricted *laissez-faire*; that equality of liberty is not the same as maximum liberty; we know that to tell the truth in all circumstances does not necessarily conduce to universal happiness; that rigorous justice is compatible neither with generosity, nor mercy, nor unrestricted freedom. And it is no great way from that to the conclusion that not all good things are compatible, still less all the ideals of mankind. But somewhere, we shall be told, in some way, it must be possible for all these values to live together, for unless this is so, the universe is not a cosmos, not a harmony; unless this is so the conflict of values – tragedy – may be an intrinsic, irremovable element in human life, and perhaps beyond it.

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 others 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, a surrender to the forces of darkness, abdication before brute facts – the recognition of things as they are without demanding their rational justification, a conclusion that ‘reason’ must indignantly reject.

And yet it seems no less clear that some positive values are in principle incompatible: that no situation seems conceivable in which truth and happiness, or kindness and justice, or liberty and equality and efficiency can be guaranteed *a priori* not to conflict. The very notion of a total harmony of all actual values and all interests, like the notions of the unity of all positive attributes, or the reducibility of all values to one, involves incompatibilities. 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 ‘true’ values in some ideal realm whose characteristics we can, in our fallen state, not even conceive, we have none but the ordinary resources of empirical observation and ordinary human knowledge; and these certainly give

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us no warrant for supposing that all good things (or all bad things for that matter) are reconcilable with each other. 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 and justified value upon the freedom to choose; for if they had an assurance that in some perfect state, realisable by me on earth, no ends pursued by them would ever be in conflict, the necessity and agony of choice would disappear, and with it the central importance of freedom to choose. Any method of bringing this final state nearer would then be justified by its purpose, no matter how much freedom were sacrificed to forward its advance.

It is, I have no doubt, some such dogmatic, a priori monism 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-perfection – for individuals either as such or as members of a nation or Church or class – which consciously animated some of these men and their followers is to be condemned in itself, or that the language which they used was necessarily the result of a confused or fraudulent use of words, or a lack of moral or intellectual understanding. 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, and 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 in principle be found whereby all the diverse ends of men can be harmoniously realised is demonstrable false. If, as I believe, the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict – and of tragedy – can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or public. The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then inevitable, and one of the characteristics of the human condition. And this gives its value to freedom as an end in itself, and not as a need arising out of

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our disordered lives, a predicament which some panacea could put right.

[215] The extent of a man's or a people's liberty to choose as they desire must be weighed against the claims of many other values, of which equality or justice or happiness, or security or public order, are perhaps the most obvious examples. For this reason it cannot be unlimited. 'Freedom for the pike is death for the minnows.' We are rightly reminded by Mr Tawney that the liberty of the strong, whether their strength is physical or economic, must be restrained. This maxim claims respect, not as a consequence of some a priori rule, whereby the respect for the liberty of one man logically entails respect for the liberty of others like him; but simply because respect for the principles of justice or equality is as basic in men as the desire for liberty. Burke's plea for the need to calculate and weigh, compromise, balance and adjust, Mill's plea for room for 'experiments in living', with its permanent possibility of error, in the knowledge that it is in principle impossible to reach wholly clear, wholly certain answers, or a priori guarantees of the rationality or 'truth' of our arrangements, may madden those who seek for final solutions and single, all-embracing systems, guaranteed to be eternal. Nevertheless, it is a conclusion that cannot be escaped by those who, [216] with Kant, have learnt the truth that 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made', and realise that, if what concerns them is the fate of individuals, they must confine themselves to piecemeal operations.<sup>23</sup>

The 'negative' liberty that they strive to realise seems to me a more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in great, disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of 'positive' self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind; more humane because it destroys less than the system-builders of what most men in our time have found to be indispensable [217] to their life as human beings. But in the end men choose between ultimate values; they choose as they

<sup>23</sup> For the best defence of this point of view see the works of Benjamin Constant *passim*, and Dr Karl Popper's well-known treatise [*The Open Society and Its Enemies*].

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do because their life and thought are determined by fundamental moral categories and concepts that are as much a part of their being and conscious thought and sense of their own identity as their basic physical structure.

It may be that the ideal 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; and that it is an ideal which remote ages and primitive societies have not known, and one on which posterity will look with curiosity but little comprehension. This may be so, but no sceptical conclusions seem to me to follow. Principles are not less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed. Indeed, the very desire to guarantee that our values are harmonious, eternal and secure in some objective heaven is perhaps only a craving for the certainties of childhood. ‘To realise the relative validity of one’s convictions’, said a distinguished modern thinker, ‘and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian.’ To demand unity and certainty is perhaps a deep universal metaphysical need; but not to resist it, and above all to allow it to guide one’s practice, is a symptom of a no less profound moral and political immaturity.

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