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Isaiah Berlin: A Value Pluralist and Humanist View of Human Nature and the Meaning of Life

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Aims and Method of this Study

Aim, Approach and Main Thread

In the past two decades the Western world has become increasingly pluralistic. There is a great deal of diversity, especially with regard to the (moral, aesthetic and epistemological) frameworks which people use in making judgements. The most important reason for this situation is undoubtedly the mass immigration of non-Western people who often hold very different views on, for instance, the relationship between the sexes, the place of honour in customs and morality and the separation of religion and state. But the processes of individualisation and secularisation of the original Western population have also accelerated in the past decades. Many Westerners regard themselves literally as *auto-nomos*, i.e. living by the values and rules they themselves make or choose to embrace. The differences between cultures and subcultures have turned out to be more profound than expected. The optimism with regard to the integration of non-Western immigrants into Western society and the trust that the individualisation of Westerners would not lead to antisocial behaviour have turned into a profound concern as to how a set of common values and norms can be established that this culturally diverse population as a whole would support (see, for instance, Etzioni 2003).

This awareness of the profound nature of pluralism is not new. Already in the 1950s Sir Isaiah Berlin began to publish on the conflictive and non-harmonious nature of pluralism. Berlin's fundamental notion is that in our (moral) universe[1] not only is there a diversity of values and ends but that which we consider to be good and worthwhile is itself filled with tension and inner conflict. We are confronted not only with the problem of the incompatibility of values and ends but also with that of incommensurability. There is no commonly shared standard or yardstick available by which these value conflicts can be resolved. For today's multicultural challenges Berlin's contribution to the theory of pluralism is indispensable. He shows not only that there

[1] Value pluralists use the term 'moral universe' to refer to the 'world' of values, norms and ethics that surrounds human beings. The ontological status of this moral universe is not immediately clear in Berlin's work. In this study we will see that Berlin oscillates between a subjectivist (constructivist) and a realist position.

is moral diversity but also that there are conflicts within “the good,” including different value systems and different concepts of justice for resolving these conflicts.

The fields of philosophy of religion and interreligious dialogue have not sufficiently taken up Berlin’s notions of value pluralism. This means that these fields have not benefited from Berlin’s insights into the roots of ideologically and religiously inspired violence which Berlin connects with the denial or negation of value pluralism. For the latter reason alone Berlin’s ideas need wider application.

Isaiah Berlin himself did not systematise his views. There have, however, been a number of studies in the area of political philosophy that reflect on Berlin’s fruitful ideas for a world struggling with different views of the good life. To make Berlin’s ideas more accessible to areas outside that of politics, in particular, those of the philosophy of religion and interreligious dialogue, I will describe Berlin’s view of human nature and the meaning of life. I will approach this from the perspectives of both philosophical anthropology and the philosophy of religion. This entails that Berlin’s basic ideas will be treated as a worldview that includes not only a specific view of human nature and the meaning of life but also truth claims about the nature of the (moral) universe and ideas on how the human situation can be improved. (In religious terms the latter would be called a soteriology).

In this study we should not expect a fully elaborated political or moral philosophy on how to deal with moral diversity and value conflicts. Berlin was first of all a historian of ideas. Yet in his worldview we can find the building blocks that precede political and moral application.

Central in Berlin’s worldview is of course his view of human nature. He combines his perspective of value pluralism with a view of human nature that belongs to the humanist family. It is difficult to indicate the essence of the latter, as it has many forms and meanings, but one of its central characteristics—which is also present in Berlin’s thought—is a positive belief in the human ability and potential to solve humanity’s problems. This includes the willingness to resolve value conflicts in a decent way (chapter 1.4), the ability to understand one another (chapter 5) and the presence of a basic morality (chapter 6). Berlin’s combination of value pluralism with this positive humanism is not self-evident. Value pluralism could equally well be combined with a much darker view of human nature, stressing the inability to understand one another, the lack of a commonly shared morality

and human beings as innately evil. Such a distrust of human nature could lead to a preference for conservative politics, whereas Berlin's more optimistic view leads to the defence of a liberal and open society. Berlin therefore combines his value pluralism with a liberal humanism. I have used the term "humanist family" deliberately, because I wish to approach humanism as a worldview in a non-holistic way. As in any other worldview, there are within humanism various schools, overlappings and combinations with other religions and worldviews, which makes it difficult to point to "one" essence or core. Berlin himself had difficulty defining humanism and did not label himself as such. Yet, not only as a "believer" in human potential but also as a defender of human dignity, of liberty, of diversity and of universal morality we can recognise many "typical" characteristics of the humanist family in his basic ideas. The combination of this with his perspective of value pluralism also makes Berlin an important challenger to humanism. He is particularly critical of those movements that, however well intended, tend to crush diversity, such as the utopian and socialist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the cosmopolitan developments of today.

The general aim of this study is to give a systematic description and analysis of the view of human nature and meaning of life that the humanist and value pluralist Sir Isaiah Berlin holds. The main thread running throughout this study is to show how Berlin's value pluralism differs from relativism. The incommensurability thesis that Berlin, as a value pluralist, holds could easily lead to the conclusion that value pluralism is a form of relativism, the school of thought that, according to Berlin's definition, "holds that there are no objective values" (CTH: 81). This is, however, not the case. In this study we will follow Berlin's struggle with the following dilemma. As a pluralist, Berlin appreciated diversity, both culturally and morally. Yet at the same time he wanted to protect certain universal values. How can he combine both commitments? In our present multicultural societies this is a well-known problem and receives a great deal of attention in contemporary humanism. In his inaugural address *On Human Dignity* the Dutch humanist Fons Elders formulated this question as follows:

> Humanism has a special position in the struggle between universal values on the one hand, and context-bounded values on the other hand. In the humanist tradition, both poles are intellectually and emotionally present. Many humanists have a strong need to see things in relative terms, but at the same time, they wish to maintain certain uni-

> versal values or principles. The question is not whether this is possible, but how. (Elders 1992: 27)

By means of this analysis of Berlin's oscillation between both commitments I will shed some light on how his value pluralism differs from relativist positions, as found in, for instance, contemporary conventionalism and postmodernism. For both epistemological positions there is no overarching standard or truth, and knowledge is simply a matter of convention or construction. Conventionalists, however, still attempt to avoid (radical) relativism by referring to the validity of particular standards. Like postmodernism and conventionalism, Berlin's value pluralism can be regarded as a reaction to modernity. Already in the 1950s and 1960s Berlin resisted the ruling academic requirements in Oxford that squeezed the richness of reality into the narrow straitjacket of the sciences. To resist modernism, however, Berlin did not draw his inspiration from twentieth-century continental thinkers like Heidegger and Gadamer but from the Counter-Enlightenment (for Berlin the eighteenth-century reaction to the Cartesian domination in science) and Romanticism, leading to quite another philosophical position.

In this study I will look not only at the epistemological aspects but also at the ontological dimensions of this dilemma. We will see that Berlin oscillates between the subjectivist and the realist position. The subjectivist position holds values are merely constructs of the human mind, whereas the realist position holds that values exist independent of the human mind. To explain the moral and cultural diversity on earth, the subjectivist position is attractive to Berlin because it supports his pluralism. Yet it has relativist consequences that he seeks to avoid. The realist foundation provides a better foundation for the absoluteness of values. The drawback, however, is that this position easily leads to the monist belief that there is only one pre-given moral framework beyond time and change. Berlin wants to combine the advantages of both ontological positions without its drawbacks. Will he succeed in this?

A possible application of this study is interreligious dialogue.[2] One of the persisting problems in contemporary dialogue between religions

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[2] This study has been done as part of the project "Why are Human Beings on Earth?" of the Free University of Amsterdam. In this project (1999-2004) the Buddhist, Christian, Moslem and Hindu philosophies of human life in a pluralist context have been studied as well. With these five studies a compar-

and worldviews is that views of human nature and the meaning of life often remain hidden and implicit. If these views are not made explicit, one of the most important sources for religious conflict will be overlooked. For instance, we would still be unaware of the deepest obstacles to the acceptance of liberal democracies or to the integration of immigrants into Western society.

To reveal the basic assumptions within Western liberalism and humanism, the ideas and works of Isaiah Berlin are particularly insightful. This is not because Berlin is a typical liberal or humanist (if it is at all possible to speak of a "type") but because he takes up dialogue with the Western tradition itself, in his own way, as an essayist (rather than as a systematic thinker) writing about the (Western) history of ideas. Berlin is self-reflective enough to be aware of his own worldview (which he calls his *Weltanschauung*).[3] From this position he engages various (mostly Western) religions and worldviews critically. His work therefore contains not only profound knowledge of how humanism and liberalism differ from (Western and non-Western) religious perspectives but also insight into the controversies within the humanist and liberal family itself, such as the tensions between libertarianism and socialism, cosmopolitan and non-cosmopolitan forms of liberalism, individualist, conservative, communitarian[4] movements and naive and radical nihilist tendencies.

In sum, the primary aim of this study is to reconstruct Berlin's view of human nature and the meaning of life. The main thread running through this reconstruction will be to show how Berlin's value pluralism differs from relativism. The reasons for this study are twofold. First, I want to introduce the insights found in Berlin's value

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ative religious anthropology is offered for the purpose of interreligious dialogue.

[3] Berlin defined *Weltanschauung* as the "general belief and attitudes towards life" and knew that a person's *Weltanschauung* very much influences his or her moral, political, aesthetic and epistemological views (Quinton 1955: 417, 501).

[4] Communitarianism is a model of political organization that stresses ties of affection, kinship, and a sense of common purpose and tradition, as opposed to the meagre morality of contractual ties entered into between a loose conglomeration of individuals (Blackburn 1994:70).

pluralism to areas outside that of political science, in particular the field of philosophy of religion in order to enrich and complement the theory of pluralism. Second, this study can facilitate interreligious dialogue because it reveals the most basic assumptions in Western humanist and liberal thought which so often remains implicit and hidden to outsiders. In the final chapter this primary aim and main thread will be reflected in two different summaries (chapter 8.1 and 8.2): the first will summarize Berlin's anthropology and the second will evaluate Berlin's attempt to remain committed to both universality and particularity. This study will end (chapter 8.3) with an overview of the humanist strands in Berlin's thought in light of a pluralist context.

Method

Unlike other twentieth-century thinkers, such as Scheler, Plessner, Jaspers and Gehlen, Berlin did not leave behind a systematic anthropology. His views of human nature and the meaning of life can be found scattered throughout his many essays. Berlin was not a philosophical anthropologist but a historian of ideas who expressed his own philosophical views in his essays. Berlin was not a systematic thinker but an essayist who was fully aware that the complexity of life can never be captured in a system. Reflection on human nature, however, has played a major role in Berlin's history of ideas. The key to understanding past and foreign cultures is a good grasp of the ruling ideas of human nature. Throughout his essays Berlin has shown how implicit anthropologies often contribute to either human suffering or flourishing. Berlin rejected the idea of squeezing human nature into an essentialist or metaphysical teleological view. He did not want an essentialism that presupposed a fixed and unchangeable human nature or a fixed purpose and an appointed place for humans in the universe and, consequently, guidelines on how men and women should live. Instead, Berlin only describes a number of basic human characteristics that reflect the human condition without any (pre-given metaphysical) teleological views as to how life should be lived. From Berlin's scattered anthropological ideas I have derived the following characteristics. Human beings

- are confronted with value conflicts in personal and social life; they are doomed to choose and live in a non-harmonious and tragic moral universe (chapter 1);
- have no hope of a harmonious society on earth (chapter 2);

- are pursuers of ends with the power of choice, who shape their own and others' lives (chapter 3);
- have a need to belong to a group or community and to be recognised (chapter 4);
- are able to understand one another and have a capacity of empathic (reconstructive) imagination (chapter 5);
- are endowed with a basic morality (chapter 6);
- are easily blinded by wrong concepts and categories, leading to unnecessary suffering and self-inflicted "evil" (chapter 7).

Central to this study will be Berlin's so-called "mature" ideas as a value pluralist that dominated his intellectual life since the Second World War. In his long and productive life Berlin published philosophical essays from the 1930s right into the early 1990s. His ideas had already started to develop just before the war, when he was writing *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* (1939). They came to fruition in the 1950s, after the Second World War and during the Cold War as a reaction to the horrors of the twentieth century. In this study I will deal only briefly with his pre-war thought. During the rest of his life his thought remained fairly stable, although there were some adjustments towards the end that will also be indicated in this study. Berlin gradually blunted the sharp edges of the value pluralism he initially expressed so boldly in the 1950s in order to escape radical relativist consequences.

In this study I will not only describe but also analyse Berlin's thoughts. An important source of inspiration for this 'descriptive analytic approach' is Berlin's value pluralism itself, namely the awareness of the presence of perennial value conflicts and the need to make difficult choices and compromises. By way of analogy, I assume that in his intellectual life Berlin also stood at many philosophical crossroads that required difficult decisions and confronted him with undesired consequences which he could not escape if he was to avoid greater disadvantages. In my approach I will in fact look more closely at what Berlin himself calls the "citadel" or "fortress" of a philosopher:

> It was, I think, Bertrand Russell—Mill's godson—who remarked somewhere that the deepest conviction of philosophers are seldom contained in their formal arguments: fundamental beliefs, comprehensive views of life are like citadels which must be guarded against the enemy. Philosophers expend their intellectual power in arguments against actual and possible objections to their doctrines, and although

> the reasons they find, and the logic that they use, may be complex, ingenious, and formidable, they are defensive weapons; the inner fortress itself—the vision of life for the sake of which the ware is being waged—will, as a rule, turn out to be relatively simple and unsophisticated. (FEL: 200-01; L: 245-46)

As indicated above, as a philosopher of religion, I will also approach Berlin's value pluralism as a worldview, as a *Weltanschauung* that he needs to defend.

Berlin's Biography

For readers interested in a detailed description of Berlin's life, I refer them to Michael Ignatieff's excellent biography *Isaiah Berlin* (1998). In this short summary of Berlin's (intellectual) biography I will focus only on the roots of Berlin's double commitment, namely his desire to protect universal values and to avoid radical relativism and at the same time his desire to allow and respect moral and cultural diversity.

Berlin considered himself to be very lucky to have survived the twentieth century. His Jewish relatives were less fortunate. His parents were forced to leave Riga (Latvia) during the Russian Revolution, not because they were Jews but because they belonged to the *bourgeoisie*. England turned out to be a good choice for this small refugee family. The young Berlin was a brilliant philosophy student and in the early 1930s he became the first Jew ever to be admitted as a Fellow at All Souls College (Oxford). In the pre-war years Berlin was mainly occupied with combating the logical positivist position which was prevalent at that time. In 1935 he was given the chance to develop his other philosophical talents and wrote a book on Karl Marx, which he finished in 1938 and which was well received. During the Second World War Berlin left Oxford to become a political analyst for the Ministry of Information and Foreign Office in Washington. He was aware, during the war, of the heavy persecution of the Jews but did not know about the death camps. His Jewish relatives who had stayed behind in Riga were almost entirely exterminated by the Nazis. During his stay in the USA in and just after the war, Berlin lobbied for an independent state for Israel. After the war he also stayed a while in the USSR where he became acquainted with a number of Russian writers and poets. One of them, Anna Akhmatova, was later persecuted for her contacts with Berlin. For his Zionist activities Berlin was offered a place in the Chaim Weizmann administration in Israel in 1948. How-

ever, he declined and returned to Oxford to become a historian of ideas, fighting "the betrayers of freedom"[5] with his many essays and lectures.

In the post-war years Oxford was still under the positivist spell and did not consider Berlin's history of ideas as proper philosophy at all. The general public, however, welcomed Berlin's approach. His BBC radio lectures in the 1950s and 1960s on topics such as "Freedom and its Betrayal" and "The Roots of Romanticism" were popular. Berlin was embraced as one of the great liberal fighters against Communism. We will see in this study that Berlin's liberal position is less classical and more social than is often supposed in general textbooks. In 1958 Berlin entered the field of political science with his "Two Concepts of Liberty." Many excellent essays on various other topics followed. The terrible fate of the Jews in Nazi Germany and the dissident thinkers in the USSR made Berlin determined to protect basic universal values. This meant that he had to reject moral relativism.

Berlin's intellectual biography also shows quite a different commitment, namely the protection of cultural diversity and particularity. Human lives should not be moulded into universal and monist systems of values and norms. Cultural diversity is an intrinsic value for Berlin. As a young man, he had read Machiavelli's *The Prince* and *Discourses* and the differences between Christian and Roman morality struck him (CTH: 8). Further reading of the writings of Giambattista Vico and Johann Gottfried Herder made him aware not only of the richness and beauty of cultural diversity but also of the fact that each culture had its own centre of gravity, its own point of reference. Therefore, cultures should not be judged from without but only from within. One of the disturbing consequences of this view is that it could lead to the denial of the existence of universal and timeless truths. That would open the door to moral relativism, a philosophical position that would give Berlin nothing to use against those who excuse their atrocious acts simply by referring to their different cultural and moral backgrounds.

Berlin's desire to protect both universal and particular values presents him with a philosophical challenge. Does he succeed in combining both commitments?

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[5] This reflects the title of one of Berlin's collection of essays based on his BBC radio lectures *Freedom and its Betrayal* (2002).

CHAPTER 1

Berlin's Value Pluralism

The historical and philosophical insights that Isaiah Berlin provided both his academic and other interested readers (and BBC listeners) are many. No doubt, his greatest contribution has been to supply a new philosophical perspective, namely value pluralism. Berlin is now regarded as the founding father of this perspective, an important stream within contemporary moral and political philosophy that has influenced a number of contemporary thinkers to varying degrees.[6] Value pluralist thinkers share the idea that there is a diversity of values and ends in our moral world and that there can be conflicts among these values. The values and ends that we pursue in our lives and that we, within our particular moral frameworks, consider as precious or ultimate, cannot always be combined into one harmonious whole. Even among people who think and act reasonably and have the best intentions there will always be disagreement about which of the good values and ends should have priority. We will begin this study on Berlin's view of human nature by describing the moral universe in which human beings have to live, which in his view is not harmonious and sometimes even tragic.

1.1 THE BASICS OF VALUE PLURALISM

Value pluralism is a term that Berlin himself hardly used; he simply called it "pluralism." The term value pluralism was developed later by others who were inspired by Berlin's new insights and wanted to distinguish their views from types of pluralism that are less aware of the possibility of conflicts within the idea itself of the good. In his famous essay "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958) Berlin describes his philosophical position as follows:

> 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—

[6] William Galston (1999: 769) lists the following thinkers who have been (partly) influenced by the principles of value pluralism: John Gray, Stuart Hampshire, John Kekes, Charles Larmore, Steven Lukes, Thomas Nagel, Martha Nussbaum, Joseph Raz, Michael Stocker, Charles Taylor and Bernard Williams.

> and of tragedy—can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social. (FEL: 169; L: 214)

This is Berlin's most important thesis in a nutshell, but of course it needs more explanation. For Berlin "the ends of men are many." This is an acknowledgement of diversity and plurality in values and ends in both personal and social life. This acknowledgement in itself does not distinguish Berlin from other pluralists, but he goes a step further. He also has a deep awareness that among these values and ends there can be conflict. Human beings are confronted with value conflicts in their lives. These conflicts occur not only between societies but also within the same society, within groups with their different subcultures and even within the various roles individuals play in life. Already in 1956 Berlin wrote that:

> … in life as normally lived the ideals of one society and culture clash with those of another, and at times come into conflict within the same society and, often enough, within the moral experience of a single individual; that such conflicts cannot always, even in principle, be wholly resolved. (CC: 96)

An example of a value conflict Berlin often uses is the conflict between justice and mercy:

> … a world of perfect justice—and who can deny that this is one of the noblest of human values?—is not compatible with perfect mercy. I need not labour this point: either the law takes its toll, or men forgive, but the two values cannot both be realised. (POI: 22)

Another example is the conflict between liberty and equality:

> Both liberty and equality are among the primary goals pursued by human beings through many centuries; but total liberty for wolves is death to the lambs, total liberty of the powerful, the gifted, is not compatible with the rights to a decent existence of the weak and the less gifted. (CHT: 12)

Incompatibility and Incommensurability

Value conflicts (dilemmas) are characterised by a necessary combination of incompatibility and incommensurability, which in turn leads to a situation in which something needs to be sacrificed. Incompatibility means that in life not all values (or different priorities in values) can be successfully combined with one another at the same

time. The reason for incompatibility usually lies in limitations of (a combination of) space, time, means and resources. One cannot lead two lives at the same time; there are only twenty-four hours in a day; one can be in only one place at one time and most people, governments and organisations have limited means. Thus, one cannot have or do everything and one has to choose. Scarcity and the finiteness of human existence lead to conflicts and therefore, for humanists, are important roots of evil. Incompatibility need not lead to difficult dilemmas if it is clear which of the values at stake is better or more important. For instance, a student wants to have a drink with his friends after several hours of studying. He decides to resist the temptation as he has an exam the following day. A value conflict becomes a true dilemma when both conflicting values are equally ultimate:

> There are many objective ends,[7] ultimate values, some incompatible with others, pursued by different societies at various times, or by different groups in the same society, by entire classes or churches or races, or by particular individuals within them, any one of which may find itself subject to conflicting claims of uncombinable, yet equally ultimate and objective ends. (CTH: 79-80)

"Incommensurability" is the term that Berlin and his value pluralist followers later used for the phenomenon that within a specific (personal or common) value system values are considered to be equally compelling and that to resolve this value conflict there is no common and pre-given higher value or other criterion to which one can refer. Value pluralists do not believe that there is an order beyond time and change (such as transcendental reason or sacred revelation) that could establish such a hierarchy in values. So a value conflict becomes a true dilemma when there is not only incompatibility, but also incommensurability. Incompatibility is therefore a necessary but not a sufficient characteristic for a value conflict.

The term incommensurability could lead to two common misunderstandings. The first has to do with the extent to which it is applied.

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[7] For Berlin, "objective ends" are ends that are recognisable as a human end by other people. Berlin believes, as we will see in this study, in a common horizon of human values. The number of human values and ends cannot be infinite and therefore we can recognise them, although we may not share the importance other people attach to them (see chapter 5).

Is incommensurability used in the broad conceptual sense? Or is it restricted to the criteria and values that are used in rival traditions to justify one's choices? The first "hard" incommensurabilty thesis is often associated (in my view not correctly)[8] with Thomas Kuhn's idea of radical paradigm shifts. It assumes quite holistically that traditions are closed and integrally exclusive systems which, because they do not share a common point of reference, are unable to understand one another. Berlin, however, holds that traditions overlap and share certain values and perspectives. He holds a "soft" incommensurability position. There is "intercommunication between cultures in time and space" (CTH). This means that for Berlin there is not "an irreducible incommensurability across discourses and narratives" (CTH:18). So Berlin's "soft" incommensurability thesis is restricted to normative criteria. This means that for Berlin it is possible to understand the other while at the same time seeing the other as wrong. (see further chapters 5 and 6).

The second potential misunderstanding of his use of the term "incommensurability" is that Berlin uses it only in the strict sense, emphasising that values cannot be measured according to a universally valid yardstick (Chang 1997: 1). The Latin word *mensura* could lead to the impression that Berlin applies the terms commensurability and incommensurability strictly to values that could be reduced into measurable units (such as financial worth). But it is in the wider sense that Berlin speaks of values that cannot be weighed against one another and cannot be graded on one scale (FEL: 171; L: 216).

Sacrifice

The inevitable consequence of a conflict between incompatible and incommensurable values is that it requires a choice that always entails a sacrifice. One of the values that is considered to be "ultimate" has to be given up:

> Now the values that I sacrifice, as opposed to the values which I chose, are the values which might be equally ultimate for me. By "ultimate" I mean values which I regard as ends in themselves, and not a means to other ends—what utilitarianism was to Mill or

[8] Especially in his later work Thomas Kuhn develops an interpretation of incommensurability that is less holistic and includes a concept of common rationality which enables comparison of paradigms.

> knowledge to Plato. Even though I may sacrifice a given value, I can perfectly well understand what it would be like if I had sacrificed a rival one. (Lukes 1998: 101)

Sacrifice cannot be avoided by seeking a compromise. There is also a price that has to be paid as both conflicting values cannot be realised completely. The word "perfect" that Berlin uses in the above example of the judge who has to decide in the value conflict between justice and mercy indicates that this is a value conflict that allows for a compromise. There are also value conflicts that can be resolved only by a rigid either/or choice and these are usually the tragic ones. In that case there is no question of "trade-offs." Berlin refers to a famous example used by Sartre:

> Take a man under Nazi occupation in France during the last war; his choice is between joining the resistance or the high likelihood of being forced to see his wife, child, parents tortured by the Nazis if and when they discover this. Then there is no question of trade-offs: you can't establish a delicate balance between the probability of torture and the obligation of resisting an absolutely evil regime. (Lukes 1998: 106)

To resolve value conflicts, Berlin shows a clear preference for compromises and trade-offs where they are possible. In a compromise, at least part of the conflicting values can be realised and the pain can be eased.

Non-Perfectionalism

A disturbing consequence of value pluralism is that a perfect life in the sense of a full realisation of all values and talents becomes impossible. Not all options in life can be realised and choices have to be made. "The notion of total human fulfilment is a formal contradiction, a metaphysical chimera" (FEL: 168; L: 213). The same obtains for the political or religious concepts that represent the human aim of establishing a perfect society on earth in which all good principles and ends can be combined and realised in harmony and peace. The idea that one day a society or community without tension will exist is, for Berlin, not only incoherent but, as we will see in the next chapter, also a very dangerous utopian dream.

Comparison of Berlin with Hegel

Berlin's preference for compromises as the outcome of a value conflict should not be confused with the Hegelian type of synthesis after the struggle between thesis and antithesis. In Hegelian philosophy an important element of the synthesis is the *Aufhebung* (sublimation), the overcoming of the contradiction. The synthesis that has been reached consists in what is valuable in the thesis and in the antithesis. The synthesis in turn becomes contradicted and the process repeats itself until final perfection is reached (Blackburn 1994: 104). Due to pluralism and conflicts within the good itself, such perfection, for Berlin, is not possible. A compromise does not bring us closer to a higher *telos* in history. The only positive aspect of a compromise for Berlin is that it divides the pain and makes the loss more bearable than a rigid either/or choice would. For Berlin, Hegel's notion of sublimation is that it is "poor comfort to those who are agonised by dilemmas" (CTH: 13).

The Profoundness of Berlin's Value Pluralism

Berlin saw that not only the value systems of different cultures as a whole are incompatible and incommensurable but also the values of persons and groups within those cultures:

> What is clear is that values can clash—that is why civilisations are incompatible. They can be incompatible between cultures, or groups in the same culture, or between you and me. You believe in always telling the truth, not matter what; I do not, because I believe that it can sometimes be too painful and too destructive. We can discuss each other's point of view, we can try to reach common ground, but in the end what you pursue may not be reconcilable with the ends to which I found that I have dedicated my life. Values may easily clash within the breast of a single individual. (CTH: 12)

In this quote we see that, for Berlin, value pluralism penetrates the whole of human life. Even individuals themselves can experience value conflicts. There is conflict not only between good and bad but also within the good. And to make this situation even worse, there is no higher judge to which one can appeal to resolve these conflicts. Each culture has its own standard. Cultures, subcultures and persons have their own criteria of what constitutes the right way to assign priority to incompatible values and ends. In a pluralist and intercultural situation this means that there is not only debate about which value or

end should have priority but also which yardstick (whose justice and which rationality?) should be applied.

Aside from Berlin, an important thinker who also noticed widespread disagreement in society is Alasdair MacIntyre. In his *After Virtue* (1981) this Artistotelean thinker shows awareness of incommensurability due to rival concepts of justice:

> we have all too many disparate and rival moral concepts, in this case rival and disparate concepts of justice, and the moral resources of the culture allow us no way of settling the issue between them rationally. (MacIntyre 1981: 235).

For MacIntyre, the cause of this disagreement is the absence of a coherent background conception of the good life that can help to settle issues in a rational way. The reason for this is in MacIntyre's view individualism and the failure of the modernist project to provide a method of independent rational justification of morality. For Berlin, the cause of disagreement is the non-harmonious and conflictive nature of the moral universe. Even if we would be able to reach a common vision of the good life, we would still be confronted with conflicts within that vision of the good and consequently different assignments of weight or significance that are attributed to those values.

The Crooked Timber of Humanity

What are the anthropological consequences of Berlin's value pluralism? Berlin uses the metaphor of "crooked timber" to characterise a human existence that has to deal with a moral universe that is non-harmonious and full of conflicts within the good itself. Berlin derived this expression from Kant and it became the title of one of his popular volumes: *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*.[9] Kant used this metaphor originally to indicate the sinful side of human beings. Although Berlin also uses the "crooked timber" metaphor for the darker aspects within human nature (see further chapter 7), his favourite use is to characterise the crookedness of the moral universe sur-

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[9] Kant's *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlichter Absicht (*1784): "Aus so krummem Holze, als woraus der Mensch gemacht ist, kann nichts ganz Gerades gezimmert werden" (*Kant's Gesammelte Schriften*, vol.8, 1912: 23). "Out of timber so crooked as that from which man is made nothing entirely straight can be built," in: "Foreword" to Berlin 1990.

rounding human beings that leads to all kinds of inner tension. To give an example, Berlin uses this metaphor to indicate that perfect solutions are not possible: "the best that one can do is to try to promote some kind of equilibrium, necessarily unstable, between the different aspirations of differing groups of human beings" (CTH: 47). Solutions in value conflicts are not always logically tidy:

> The way out must therefore lie in some logically untidy, flexible and even ambiguous compromise. Every situation calls for its own specific policy, since "out of the crooked timber of humanity", as Kant once remarked, "no straight thing was ever made". (FEL: 39; L: 92)

To use another example, Berlin uses the notion of "crooked timber" to critique the tendency to admire persons who live completely according to ideals and who make radical choices, such as artists who abandon their families to live in a way more propitious to their art (CTH: 181). For Berlin rigid either/or or radical decisions are not always needed in value conflicts:

> There are too many individuals in the world who do not choose to see life in the form of radical choices between one course and another, and whom we do not condemn for this reason. "Out of the crooked timber of humanity", said a great philosopher, "no straight thing was ever made". (POI: 181)

Human beings should be given the chance to realise different roles in life (as an artist, a husband, a father), even if that means that in each role they are less successful. To use yet a third example, Berlin uses the metaphor to indicate that human beings cannot be squeezed into "cut-and-dry models" (FEL: 193; L: 238) or into "the neat uniforms demanded by dogmatically believed-in schemes" (CTH: 18, 19).

Berlin uses the metaphor of "crooked timber" to express his view of the human condition as characterised by a number of contradictions that cannot be reconciled. These contradictions lead to tension within the individual, within groups and within societies. They form a large potential source of conflict. This is, in fact, a tragic form of evil: it happens to people without any intention on their part, despite their primary desire to harmonise values. (We will discuss evil in chapter 7). Value conflicts are part of our moral order and as human beings we cannot always avoid them. Yet as human beings we can choose how to deal with and how to approach these value conflicts. There are

ways that diminish or increase the sacrifice and suffering connected with value conflicts, as we will see in this study.

In contemporary postmodern thought this ambiguity in human nature is more widely noticed. The terms that Richard Rorty, for instance, uses to describe this ambiguity are "existential irony," "anthropological irony" (when it concerns contradictions within human nature) and "metaphysical irony" (when it concerns both the tragic and comic contradictions and features of the world) (Schmid 2001: 86).

1.2 The Roots of Value Pluralism

Particularly through reading the works of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), Berlin noticed that there are not only different cultures and subcultures in the world but also that their moralities can be incompatible. In Machiavelli's world there was a clash between Christian morality and Roman morality which seeks power. Typical Christian virtues are "humility, acceptance of suffering, unworldliness, the hope of salvation in an afterlife" (CTH: 8).

Giambattista Vico (1667-1744) also noticed that the virtues of, for instance, the Homeric Greeks were quite different from those of the city of Naples of his time. Vico was particularly concerned with the succession of human cultures. For him, each society had its own view of reality. The values of these cultures are different and not necessarily compatible with one another. They differ with each successive social whole and are also incommensurable with one another. Each culture has its own values and mode of creation and can only be understood on its own terms (CTH: 8-9). Vico's brilliant insights remained unnoticed until the end of the nineteenth century.

The thinker who really set in motion the idea that each civilisation has its own outlook and way of thinking and feeling and acting was Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). For Herder as well, civilisations could only be understood and judged in terms of their own scale of values:

> …since each of these civilisations has its own outlook and way of thinking and feeling and acting, creates its own collective ideals in virtue of which it is a civilisation, it can be truly understood and judged only in terms of its own scale of values, its own rules of thought and action, and not of those of some other culture, least of all in terms of some universal, impersonal, absolute scale, such as the

> French *philosophes* seemed to think that they had at their disposal when they so arrogantly and blindly gave marks to all societies, past and present, praised or condemned this or that individual or civilisation or epoch, set some up as universal models and rejected others as barbarous or vicious or absurd. (TCE: 15)

As "a critic of the Enlightenment," Herder fought against the tendency of his time to judge societies in terms of French Enlightenment values as inferior and barbarous. Herder was one of the first philosophers who accused Enlightenment thinkers of a "narrowly *dixhuitième* and Parisian point of view" (TCE: 171). For Herder, there was no *Favoritvolk*; there was no superiority of a certain class or culture or nation: "There are no immutable, universal, eternal rules or criteria of judgement in terms of which different cultures and nations can be graded in some single order of excellence" (CTH: 37). For Herder "every nation has its own inner centre of happiness, as every sphere its own centre of gravity" (TCE: 211).[10] For Herder, "nothing is more fatal than the attempted assimilation of the Mittelpunkt of one culture with those of others" (TCE: 211).

Neither Vico and Herder nor their contemporaries and followers saw fully the consequences of their ideas for value pluralism. They still maintained a rather holistic view of culture which only made them aware of value conflicts between cultures. Berlin also saw the incompatibility of values and value systems of groups within the same culture, between individuals and even within single individuals (CTH: 12).

Nietzsche as a Source of Value Pluralism?

Berlin developed his value pluralism entirely on his own. Later in his life he recognised that Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) had also observed a clash between values (Lukes 1998: 102). But Nietzsche's ideas could not lead to value pluralism in Berlin's sense. The reason is the all-embracing role of the will of power in Nietzsche's thought. Berlin denies this role of the will. According to Nietzsche, the will to power is the basic impulse in life. It continually wants to become stronger and seeks to supplement its power. The will is most strongly

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[10] Berlin refers here to Herder's often cited metaphor: "Every nation has the centre of its happiness within itself just as every ball has its own centre of gravity" (Herders Werke V: 509).

expressed when it encounters opposition. For Nietzsche, life is therefore a struggle between opposites, in which the one will to power opposes the other (Stoker 1996: 94). Values are, for Nietzsche, products of both strong and weak powers of will. The weak power of the will produces what Nietzsche calls the "morality of slaves," which encompasses virtues such as helpfulness, humility, compassion and neighbourly love. This weak morality must be conquered by the morality of the strong power of the will. This strong morality accepts suffering as a reality of life, needs no true eternal worlds to which one can escape and accepts the possibility of destruction as a way to realise oneself. Thus, in these clashes of values, priority must be given to the values of the *Übermensch*. For Nietzsche, there is a priority in conflicting values; therefore there is no real incommensurability and no value pluralism in Berlin's sense.

1.3 Value Conflicts with and within Liberty

An introduction into Berlin's value pluralism could not be complete without looking closely at the value conflicts that in political theory made Berlin famous, namely between liberty and equality and within the concept of liberty. In this section we will also explore the not so self-evident relationship between value pluralism and liberalism.

The Tension between Liberty and Equality

One of Berlin's most obvious examples of value conflicts in the social and political field is that between liberty and equality:

> Liberty, in whichever sense, is an eternal human ideal, whether individual or social. So is equality. But perfect liberty (as it must be in the perfect world) is not compatible with perfect equality. If man is free to do anything he chooses, then the strong will crush the weak, the wolves will eat the sheep, and this puts an end to equality. If perfect equality is to be attained, then men must be prevented from outdistancing each other, whether in material or in intellectual or in spiritual achievement, otherwise inequalities will result. The anarchist Bakunin, who believed in equality above all, thought that universities should be abolished because they bred learned men who behaved as if they were superior to the unlearned, and this propped up social inequalities. (POI: 22)

Berlin again uses the terms "perfect liberty" and "perfect equality" here. This means that a compromise is possible and a rigid either/or

decision can be avoided. The outcome of perfect liberty is not preferable to Berlin as this would entail crushing the weak. Full equality is not desirable either as this would mean that the liberty to gain property or spiritual or intellectual wisdom must be seriously diminished. A completely egalitarian society or a completely liberal one are, for Berlin, not perfect societies. On the contrary, they both lead to great human suffering.

What is remarkable here is Berlin's negative view of human nature. Complete liberty apparently means that human beings can become wolves or, to use a similar expression, "The freedom of the pike is the death of the minnows" (FEL: 124; L: 171). This rather dark view of human nature contrasts with his more optimistic view of human ability to resolve value conflicts, as we will see later in this chapter. Berlin's ambivalent position on the evil side of human beings will also be discussed in chapter 7.

The values of liberty and equality are interrelated, leading to much confusion. It is this confusion that Berlin wants to clear up in his work. It is obvious that when human beings, because of their inequality, are poor, ignorant or even worse, illiterate, underfed or diseased, they can hardly make use of their freedom. Without adequate conditions for the use of freedom, individual freedom has little value. This makes people prepared to sacrifice their individual freedom to reduce inequality and widespread misery in society. For Berlin, this is an understandable choice in a value conflict. Yet it is important for him not to confuse the term freedom with (or to reduce it to) the term equality. Political thinkers of the left especially tend to speak of "social' or "economic' freedom. What Berlin objects to is not the fact that people are prepared give up individual liberty to reduce inequality but the tendency to negate or conceal its price, namely the loss of individual freedom. The reason for concealing the price could, for socialists, be strategic, but it could also be the result of an unreflective belief that the world of values is harmonious. Good values such as liberty or equality cannot lead to conflict. The serious side effect of this belief is that people can become blind to the sacrifices they inevitably have to make in value conflicts. To avoid this confusion between liberty and equality it is important for Berlin that one see the difference between the *means* to make use of liberty and the *essence* of liberty. The essence of liberty is at stake when there is deliberate (external) inter-ference or coercion by others. This is, however, not the case when the means to make use of one's freedom are not present. Thus, the essence

of Berlin's concept of liberty is "negative liberty," the freedom not to be obstructed by others.

How does Berlin define equality? In his essay "Equality" (1956) Berlin uses the utilitarian definition of equality, namely "every man to count for one and no one to count for more than one" (CC: 81). For Berlin it is essential that at least political and legal equality are secured in society and it is less important that there is economic or social equality. He realises that, if there is only political and legal equality, the strong and the clever and the ambitious may succeed in enriching themselves or acquire political power at the expense of other members of society (CC: 93). Legal and political equality often result in economic and other forms of inequality "given the different endowments of man" (CC: 93). For Berlin, this is the consequence we have to bear if we do not want a society "where physical characteristics, mental endowment, emotional disposition, and conduct are as uniform as possible" (CC: 92). Such a society would kill all creativity and cultural diversity. By skill or luck or natural endowment, some do manage to acquire more property or power. These inequalities are, for Berlin acceptable, if all human beings

> start off with equal rights to acquire and hold property, to associate with each other in whatever ways they wish, to say whatever they will, and all the other traditional objectives of liberalism, and with no special rights or privileges attached to birth, colour and other physically unalterable characteristics. (CC: 94).

The Tension between Positive and Negative Liberty

Value pluralism entails that there are conflicts not only between liberty and equality but also within the concept of liberty itself. To show that tension, Berlin makes a distinction between positive liberty and negative liberty. Positive liberty is derived from the desire 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 the instrument of my own, not of other men's acts of will" (FEL: 131; L: 178). Positive liberty stems from "the desire to be governed by myself, or at any rate to participate in the process by which my life is to be controlled" (FEL: 131). It is the freedom "to." Negative liberty stems from the desire to have a free area for action. Negative liberty is the area in which one can act unobstructed by others, without deliberate obstacles (FEL: 122; L: 169). It is the freedom "from."

The two concepts of liberty are usually complementary. One cannot be master of one's own life, if one is constantly forced by others to do things which one does not want to do. However, there can also be situations in which these two concepts of liberty are in conflict. This is especially the case when we are no longer dealing with a personal vision of the good that removes inner obstacles but with a common vision of the good that is presented as being in the personal interest of the individual who is not yet aware of it. This common vision of the good is usually a specific ideal for society. In order to reach that goal, rulers or religious leaders feel that it is justified to limit the negative liberty of their subjects drastically. They show no hesitations in interfering in personal lives in order to remove those 'inner' obstacles that stand in the way of reaching their dreams. This conflict between negative and positive liberty was especially present in Communist societies.

In his famous "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958) Berlin analysed how Communist leaders abused the relatively harmless notion of positive liberty that had so far functioned predominantly within a religious context. The concept of positive liberty had played a role as a prerequisite for self-perfection or self-realisation. To liberate oneself from spiritual slavery or slavery to nature, the positive concept of liberty had been used to remove the (internal) obstacles that prevent a person from giving direction to his or her own life. One of the metaphors used for that purpose was the distinction between the higher and lower selves. This metaphor has Platonic and Christian roots and served in the battle against the slavery of unbridled passions that were thought to be part of one's lower nature. If one wanted be one's own master, it was better to identify oneself with one's higher nature, which should be ruled by divine guidelines.[11] Kant transformed the metaphor of the higher and lower selves into the autonomous and heteronomous selves that should be ruled by Reason. Secular Communist leaders used the metaphor of higher and lower selves to mould society

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[11] Berlin also notes that within ascetic or quietist forms of religion (Buddhism, Stoicism) there can be a confusion of positive and negative liberty. Ascetics seek to liberate themselves by retreating what Berlin calls "their inner citadel" and in this isolation from the world try to rid themselves of their original affections and desires (FEL: 135). Such a retreat is often represented as "liberation" or "self-emancipation," but for Berlin this form of ascetic self-liberation is part of the positive concept of liberty that stands in sharp contrast with its negative variant.

to their idea of the common good. They claimed to know what was in the best interests of their subjects and postulated a higher self to justify coercion in the name of some goal which their subjects would, if they would be more enlightened, pursue themselves (FEL: 133; L: 179). The Communists even went so far as to link the metaphor of the higher and lower selves with the battle between the good and bad principles in society. The notion of positive liberty was no longer used to remove inner obstacles to self mastery but to clear away obstacles to reaching the perfect society as envisioned by the revolutionary leaders. Claiming that the citizens would become truly free, the leaders sacrificed their negative liberty. Because of the confusion between the two concepts of liberty, however, that sacrifice was concealed.

Berlin fears that any well-intended paternalism may go so far that citizens are not able to live their lives according to their vision of the good, whether inspired by one's culture or religion or personal views. In this value conflict between positive and negative liberty, Berlin gives priority to the latter. The reason for that is Berlin's commitment to the protection of (cultural) diversity and personal freedom. Berlin usually refuses to assign any value priority in value conflicts, but in this case Berlin is of the opinion that governments should be modest with regard to the positive goals they want to impose on their citizens and should always guarantee a certain area of non-interference. (For the justification of this priority in this value conflict see also chapter 6.3).

After the publication of "Two Concepts of Liberty" Berlin became known as one of the key defenders of negative liberty in the Cold War. In debates on political philosophy Berlin was accused of ignoring the need for positive goals in society. The characterisation of Berlin as a classical liberal wanting nothing more than a night watchman's state is, in my view, not justified. For Berlin, there can be good reasons for sacrificing negative liberty in order to realise other (positive) values, such as education, public security or public health. In practice, these goods are not questioned. With the exception of a few radicals, most Christians, atheists, Muslims, Hindus, etc. want these goods as well in order to be able to realise their own specific goals. Also, due to his awareness of the darker aspects of human nature, Berlin realises that negative liberty cannot be unlimited. "Legal liberties are compatible with extremes of exploitation, brutality and injustice." Therefore, for Berlin, the case for intervention' is "overwhelmingly strong" (FEL: xlvi; L: 38). Thus, what Berlin objects to is

a far-reaching interference in personal lives in order to reach a specific ideal for society, such as a theocratic or full egalitarian society. With regard to the relation between positive and negative liberty, Berlin also speaks of a “a balance between the two, about which no clear principle can be enunciated” (Jahanbegloo 1992: 41).

The Tension between Liberty and Value Pluralism

In political theory it is usually assumed that liberalism and value pluralism form a happy couple. A pluralist society needs liberal principles to enable cultural diversity. A disturbing consequence of Berlin’s value pluralism, however, is that the relationship between liberalism and value pluralism is not self-evident. Liberty is a value that has to compete with other good values:

> The extent of a man’s, or a people’s, liberty to choose to live 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. (FEL: 170; L: 215)

Value pluralism entails that liberty cannot logically be the dominant criterion for social action (FEL: 169, L: 114). The British political philosopher John Gray has given a special term to Berlin’s liberalism, i.e. “agonistic liberalism,” referring to the Greek term *agon* for the painful competition and struggle in sports and on the battlefield. Liberty can be established only after a painful struggle (agony) with other values.

This means that, from the perspective of value pluralism, there is no logical connection with liberalism. Yet Berlin is committed to protecting diversity and wants a certain minimum discretionary space for citizens to pursue their own values and ends. How can he guarantee that in a value conflict, after fierce competition with other values, a certain measure of negative liberty remains? In chapter 3.1 and 6.3 we will take up this theme again.

1.4 The Ability to Resolve Value Conflicts

Confronted with inevitable value conflicts, human beings must find ways to resolve them. There are no common standards for assessment. In Berlin’s words:

> The right policy cannot be arrived at in a mechanical or deductive fashion: there are not hard-and-fast rules to guide us; conditions are

> often unclear, and principles incapable of being fully analysed or articulated. We seek to adjust the unadjustable, we do the best we can. (FEL: lv; L: 47)

Despite this lack of universally valid methods for weighing the choices, in this section we meet a rather optimistic Berlin who is confident that human beings have the ability to resolve value conflicts. He believes that, especially in concrete situations, it becomes clear which value should have priority or how compromises can be reached. "In concrete situations not every claim is of equal force" (CTH: 17). The priorities that are established, however, should never be considered as final or absolute. He also presupposes the willingness to compromise, to take the interests of others into account and settle differences in a decent way.

Avoiding Either/Or Decisions

Berlin prefers compromises above rigid either/or decisions. In exceptional cases either/or decisions cannot be avoided, but when this is not the case compromises should be sought in order to ease the pain. For Berlin, it is important in both personal and social life to reduce avoidable suffering where possible.

With regard to value conflicts in personal life, Berlin recognises a tendency to prefer radical choices between one course and another:

> To tell an artist that he must choose—to force on him quite gratuitously a rigid "either-or", just because we like "radical" solutions—is an intolerable form of bullying in a society, which recognises the rights of human beings to a certain elasticity, to the right to realise themselves as they wish within the widest possible limits compatible with the existence of a minimum of justice and liberty and well-being. (PI: 180-81)

Berlin notices a certain "elasticity" in human beings that enables them to realise various goals. A person should be able, for instance, to combine family life with his or her career and not be forced to make a rigid either/or decision, even if that would mean less success.

With regard to value conflicts in the social and political sphere, Berlin favours a compromise as well or a *modus vivendi* instead of the imposition of only one of the conflicting values. He wants neither *laissez faire* liberalism nor a communist bureaucracy.

Resisting Monism

One of the prerequisites for resolving value conflicts and finding compromises and balances is to accept the incommensurability of conflicting values (and value systems). Berlin wants us to resist monism, i.e. the idea that all moral questions have one correct answer and that these answers can be derived from a single coherent moral system (CTH: 5). For Berlin, monism has been a very persistent idea in Western thought since Plato, yet it can and must be resisted. Monism rests upon three unquestioned dogmas:

> (1) that to all genuine questions there is one true answer and one only, all other being deviations from the truth and therefore false, and that this applies to questions of conduct and feeling, that is to practice, as well as to questions of theory and observation—to questions of value no less than to those of fact;
>
> (2) that the true answers to such questions are in principle knowable;
>
> (3) that these true answers cannot clash with one another, for one true proposition cannot be incompatible with another; that together these answers must form a harmonious whole: according to some they form a logical system each ingredient of which logically entails and is entailed by all the other elements; according to others, the relationship is that of parts to a whole, or, at the very least, of complete compatibility of each element with all the others. (CTH: 209)

Monists do not necessarily deny the incompatibility of certain values, but they reject their incommensurability and the pluralism behind it. They believe that there is a single correct solution available. As a historian of ideas, Berlin aims to show in his work that this idea is wrong (see next chapter). Once humans see this, Berlin believes that they will be able to resist their monist tendency. When people accept pluralism, they also show more willingness to compromise.

The Rejection of Utilitarianism and Deontology

For conflict resolution it is possible to take recourse in classical moral theories, namely utilitarianism and Kantianism. Berlin rejects both because they are based on monist assumptions. Both of these classical moral theories are based on the (for Berlin false) idea that obligatory actions can be derived from a single principle. Allow me to elaborate on this.

Within utilitarianism the principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number should always have priority. The greatest happiness principle could, however, conflict with the interests and values of individuals whose interests cannot always be sacrificed for the greater good. In a BBC interview with Bryan Magee Berlin used the following example. A number of people suffer from a kidney disease, but there is only one kidney machine available. What are we to do?

> Should we put such questions to ourselves as: "Which of these persons is going to benefit society most"? This is an agonizing question of practical choice. The moral philosopher is not there to give an answer to that, to say: "Save the great scientist", or "Save the child". He may do so as a human being: but if he is, in addition, a good moral philosopher, he will be in a position to explain to you the kinds of consideration involved. He will say: "What is your goal? What are you looking for? Are you entirely concerned about the happiness of mankind? Is that your only consideration? If it is, then I daresay it is right to save the scientist, because he will probably confer greater benefits than this child, however innocent. Or do you also believe that all human beings have certain basic rights, and all have an equal claim to be saved, and that one must not even ask which of two people is 'more important'? Is this your thought? Well, then," he might continue, "there is a conflict of values here. On the one hand you believe in increasing human happiness but on the other hand you also believe that there is something wrong in grading claims to life—and other basic rights—and so creating a hierarchy of claims where there should be equality. You cannot have it both ways. These aims conflict." (Magee 1978: 31)

Berlin did not give the BBC audience the answer to this value conflict. He only showed that the monist assumption of giving priority to the principle of the greatest happiness conflicts with the moral principle that all human beings have basic rights and that their lives should not be reduced to costs and benefits.

The monist character of Kantian (deontological) ethics is slightly more difficult to show, since Kant's supreme principle of morality, the universal law, has a formal nature. "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant *Groundwork*: 421). This Kantian supreme principle of morality has no content and can therefore be applied in many different cultural situations. However, for Berlin, Kantian ethics ignores the

fact that there can be value conflicts in which there is more than one good maxim that can be universalised. Which of the categorical imperatives should then be obeyed? Also, Berlin does not believe in the existence of the Kantian transcendental reason (Jahanbegloo 1992: 113) (see further chapter 3.1).

It is remarkable that, when Berlin introduced his value pluralist ideas in the 1950s and 1960s, his readers and even moral philosophers did not notice the negative consequences for utilitarianism and Kantianism. Charles Taylor describes this situation as "a bomb that was planted in the academy but somehow failed to go off." The reason that Taylor gives for this is "just because Isaiah said to all and sundry that he had more or less 'emigrated' from philosophy, his colleagues felt that their own systems were not targeted in his remarks" (Dworkin 2001: 117).

A Negative Utilitarian Principle?

It could be argued that there is a kind of "meta-principle" present in Berlin's work by which he resolves value conflicts. Berlin prefers "the choice of whatever doesn't frustrate too many people's ultimate ends" (Lukes 1998: 109). This "meta-principle" could be understood as a "negative" utilitarian principle because it tries to avoid suffering (unhappiness) as much as possible. For Berlin himself, however, this "meta-principle" is not utilitarian as frustration need not be caused by the denial of the greatest happiness but can also be caused by a denial of fundamental rights. The realisation of rights does not always cause the greatest happiness. Against this argument it could be argued that Berlin still uses a nineteenth-century (Millean) understanding of the term "utility." Utility can also be defined defined in a much broader sense, which includes the non-frustration of all kinds of preferences, including rights or religious priorities.

The Escape to Elements of Virtue Ethics

With regard to conflict resolution, Berlin also shows an attraction to virtue ethics. In, for instance, his essays on statesmen such as Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt Berlin describes how these statesmen were confronted with agonising moral dilemmas, sending tens of thousands of soldiers to the Normandy beaches to liberate Europe. For Berlin, a good statesman whose job it is to deal with value conflicts should display a certain wisdom:

> What is called wisdom in statesmen, political skill is understanding rather than knowledge—some kind of acquaintance with relevant facts of such a kind that it enables those who have it to tell what fits with what, what can be done in given circumstances and what cannot, what means will work in what situations and how far, without necessarily being able to explain how they know this or ever what they know. (SR: 32-33)

Mere knowledge of facts is not enough. Skills such as the power of observation, a sense of timing, sensitivity to the needs and capacities of human beings are also needed. Berlin calls this capacity practical wisdom, or practical reason. He also thinks that a good statesman (but also a historian or anthropologist) should have a sense of reality (SR: 47). The virtue "sense of reality" is the title and central theme of one of his collections of essays published in 1996. The reality to which Berlin refers in this virtue is a concern for the consequences of ideas and choices for real people with their various and conflicting values and ends in a real world that does not fall neatly in the patterns and laws the scientists envisage (RT: 111, 207). In his essay "Political Judgement" (1957) Berlin describes the epistemological qualities of a wise statesman as follows:

> The gift we mean entails, above all, a capacity for integrating a vast amalgam of constantly changing, multicoloured, evanescent, perpetually overlapping data, too many, too swift, too intermingled to be caught and pinned down and labelled like so many individual butterflies. To integrate in this sense is to see the data (those identified by scientific knowledge as well as by direct perception) as elements in a single pattern, with their implications, to see them as symptoms of past and future possibilities, to see them pragmatically—that is, in terms of what you or others can or will do to them, and what they can or will do to others or to you. To seize a situation in this sense one needs to see, to be given a kind of direct, almost sensuous contact with the relevant data, and not merely to recognise their general characteristics, to classify them or reasons about them, or analyse them, or reach conclusions and formulate theories about them. (SR: 46)

Politicians should have the capacity to weigh the different values and seek compromises in order to secure other values.

Berlin's recourse to practical wisdom (*phronesis)* is not surprising. In recent moral theory generally there has been a revival of virtue ethics. Awareness of moral and cultural diversity and relativism has

put pressure on classical moral theories. In the absence of fixed theories and principles, more emphasis is being put on the identity of the choosing actor, including his or her virtues and skills.[12]

In Berlin's thought we see a trust that in concrete situations it is usually possible to find the right priority in conflicting values (CTH, 17). Yet it cannot be said that Berlin is fully committed to the Aristotelian paradigm. An explanation of this can be found in *Morality and Conflict* (1983) by Stuart Hampshire, Berlin's value pluralist friend and Oxford colleague. Hampshire writes that Aristotle was aware that there can be difficult questions of priority (such as the famous conflict between the claims of pure thought and the claims of practical wisdom and of public life). But he also presupposed that in the end a harmony of moral requirements is attainable and that therefore a harmonious and complete life can be achieved (Hampshire 1983: 140). For Hampshire, who is also a value pluralist, there cannot be a guaranteed harmony among competing moral requirements and interests. We do have a common human nature, but the "naked man" is always overlaid by culture, which leads to different ideals of completeness. In Hampshire's words:

> How could there be a guaranteed harmony among competing moral requirements and interests, a harmony founded on common human nature, if this common human nature is always overlaid by some specific moral requirements, which are not founded on a universal human nature, the naked man, and which are known to be diverse? (Hampshire 1983: 142)

There are different ideals of a harmonious and complete life and therefore a natural harmony between conflicting requirements becomes questionable. Berlin's virtue ethics cannot therefore be strictly

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[12] For the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, for instance, the Aristotelian perspective is particularly useful for dealing with value conflicts. Aristotle was aware of the possibility of tragic dilemmas in life. The way to resolve these conflicts is, for Aristotle, not by abstract theoretical reasoning but by reference to practical life. According to Nussbaum, Aristotle was aware that emotions play a key role in practical life. It is through emotions that values make an appeal to us. Through emotions we become aware of situations of conflict. Furthermore, in practical life there is a natural tendency towards the good which is a prerequisite for resolving value conflicts in an ethical way. In Berlin's thought emotions play no role in conflict resolution, but we do see a clear reference to practical life.

Aristotelian. (We will discuss Hampshire and Berlin's distinction between the natural and conventional levels in human nature and the consequences for morality further in chapter 6.1).

It should be noted that Berlin also rejects the quite popular view that value conflicts can be solved by behaving in a virtuous way. It is the tragic nature of our non-harmonious moral universe and cultural influences and the presence of moral diversity that causes value conflicts. Even if human beings would be properly educated in virtues and as a result become less egocentric and would even learn to regard their own good as part of the common good, there still would be value conflicts. The role of virtue in Berlin's *oeuvre* is therefore limited to assisting those who are responsible for resolving value conflicts rather than providing a final solution for them.

From a pluralist perspective, another question that arises is: With whose virtuous qualifications should this wise person comply? Although virtue ethics is primarily aimed at the identity of the choosing actor, in the end it is also based on a specific vision of the good that serves as a standard or criterion for determining which virtues contribute to that goal and to what extent. Otherwise, how can we judge whether a person is wise, practical or in another sense virtuous? Value pluralism states that there is no universal standard to which one can refer. Berlin seems to ignore this aspect and to take the Western standard of virtues as *the* standard. (In the next chapter, however, we will see that there is a standard for him that seems to meet the requirements of pluralism, namely his concept of a "decent society.")

The Task of a Moral Philosopher

If classical moral theories are no longer adequate, what should be the task of a moral philosopher? For Berlin, it should not be his or her business to give guidance to people in their lives. Berlin realises that many people expect this from the moral philosopher. They want to be given answers; they want to be told how to live. For Berlin, the task of a moral philosopher should be to clarify what is at stake:

> … to face them with the issues, with the range of possible courses of action to explain to them what they could be choosing and why. He should endeavour to illuminate the factors involved, to reveal the fullest range of possibilities and their implications, to show the character of each possibility, not in isolation, but as an element in the wider context, perhaps of an entire form of life. He should show, moreover,

> how the opening of one door may lead to the opening or shutting of other doors—in other words, to reveal the unavoidable incompatibility of, the clash between, some values—often incommensurable values; or, to put it in a slightly different way, point to the loss and gain involved in an action, an entire way of life, often not in quantitative terms, but in terms of absolute principles of values which cannot always be harmonised. When a moral philosopher has in this fashion placed a course of action in its moral context, identified its position on a moral map, related its character, motive, goal to the constellation of values to which it belongs, drawn out its probable consequences and its relevant implications, provided arguments for it or against it, or both for and against it, with all the knowledge, understanding, logical skill and moral sensibility that he possesses—then he has done his job as philosophical advisor. It is not his business to preach or exhort or praise or condemn, only to illuminate: in this way he can help, but it is then for each individual or group, in the light (of which there can never be enough) of what they believe and seek after, to decide for themselves. The philosopher can do no more than make as clear as he can what is at stake. But that is to do a very great deal. (Magee 1978: 33)

The role of the moral philosopher is to illuminate the issue and therein assist people in making their own judgements.

Reasoned Value Judgements

The absence of shared standards of assessment could lead to the idea that value conflicts can be resolved only in a non-rational way.[13] We may be able to justify our choices explicitly by referring to the values to which we are committed, but in the end the weight that we attribute to these values is arbitrary.

For Berlin, it is important that value conflicts are resolved "in the light of reason" (FEL: lv; L: 47). Decisions in value conflicts always entail a price or sacrifice and for the "victims" it is important to know the reason why they have to bear it. A proper justification should be given as to why, in a particular situation, preference is given to value

[13] For instance, in *After Virtue* Alasdair MacIntyre indicates the problem that in our culture there are many rival moral concepts and concepts of justice that are incommensurable. Therefore, there are no criteria for settling our differences in a rational way (MacIntyre 1981: 8, 235).

A above value B or why a compromise was needed. Berlin defines rationality[14] as

> … a capacity for following logical arguments, for being consistent, for knowing what means lead to what ends (which is empirical knowledge), for needing to give reasons for what you do, which means giving reasons in terms ultimately of the ends you pursue, which we then examine to consider whether they really are ends which you are justified in pursuing, given how many other ends may be excluded. (Lukes 1998: 118)

But what can count as a reasoned value judgement when there is no common standard to which one can refer? In this quote Berlin refers to the ends a person pursues and a "we" that examines whether these ends are justified. In another text Berlin is clearer. Good reasons and arguments for one's preference need to be given in terms of both "my scale of values—my plan or way of life" and in terms of the values of one's "society, nation, party, church, class or species" (Berlin 1983: 391). Also, in his introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty* (1958) and *Liberty* (2002) Berlin writes:

> If we wish to live in the light of reason, we must follow rules or principles; for that is what being rational is. When these rules or principles conflict in concrete cases, to be rational is to follow the course of conduct which least obstructs the general pattern of life in which we believe. (FEL: lv; L: 47)

For Berlin, therefore, decisions can be rationally justified "by their coherence with some overall pattern of a desirable form of personal or social life" (FEL: lv; L: 47)

For Berlin, value conflicts can be resolved "in the light of reason" by disconnecting rationality from the requirement of commensurability. The different concepts of rationality need not be shared. The problem with this solution is that it remains a particularist one. A rational choice is possible only within a particular context. Choices can be rationally justified only in a diachronic way (within a tradition

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[14] From this definition of rationality the impression could be given that Berlin denies the presence of irrational drives in human nature. This is not the case. Within human nature there are also deep irrational elements. Without them "there would be no religion, no art, no love. None of these things are justifiable by purely rational means" (Lukes 1998: 113).

or life plan) and not in a synchronic way (between rival traditions and life plans). Not only does this lead to relativism, but it also does not provide any concrete solution for governments of today's multicultural or pluralist societies which have to deal with rival visions of what is rational and fair.

A Holistic Tendency in Berlin's Thought

Another problem that arises with the above solution for reasoned value judgements is that it reflects a rather holistic view of a person's identity and culture (forms of life) that is inconsistent with Berlin's value pluralist starting points and his own characterisation of human nature as "crooked timber" (see chapter 1.1). Berlin refers to individual life plans or moral frameworks of one's community and the criteria for reasoned value judgements are coherence and consistency. But how is this possible when there is so much ambiguity in human nature and culture? Berlin's value pluralism gives rise to a fragmented view of the self and culture (form of life). The human self is internally divided as individuals have to combine different conflicting roles in their lives (see, for instance, Musschenga 2004: 103-23). Also, cultures do not form coherent wholes as they include a variety of subcultures, each with their own moral framework. Berlin seems to negate the fragmentist consequences of his own value pluralism. But, without presupposing a whole, criteria such as consistency and coherence would become problematic. To avoid arbitrariness in choices, Berlin must hold to a certain unity within his concepts of the self (identity), life-plans and culture.

Support for Berlin's emphasis on unity instead of fragmentation in his view of culture can be found in contemporary anthropology where there is an increasingly critical attitude towards postmodern notions of culture that stress fragmentation, change and diversity. For these anthropologists there must be something that holds cultures together. Without the assumption of some unity within cultures, it becomes impossible to make any comparisons, generalizations or substantive statements (Tennekes 1990).[15]

[15] Within anthropology there is a perennial question as to whether in the study of cultures emphasis should be given to diversity/change or to unity. The aim of anthropology has even been defined as "the controlled and value-free investigation of both the unity and the diversity of the human species" (Winthrop 1991: 50). For anthropology, it has always been a challenge to

There is another side-effect to a holistic view of culture. We have recently become aware of the problems of, especially, women and homosexuals in Western multicultural societies. If cultures are regarded as wholes, there will be insufficient awareness of the value conflicts within those cultures. This leads to a certain blindness to the values and ends of individuals and subgroups that are often ignored and crushed by the dominant group culture. Out of respect for the group identity and group values, culturally or religiously justified discrimination of certain groups has been seriously ignored.[16] Berlin was aware of these conflicts between individuals and their groups, but, due to his commitment to protecting cultures as a whole, he ignored this undesired side-effect.

Berlin's Optimism

Berlin is pessimistic about the chance of ever eliminating value conflicts, but he is quite optimistic with regard to the human ability to resolve dilemmas in a decent way. Human beings are, in principle, not only able to rise above their monist (or fundamentalist) tendencies but are also able to transcend their own interests and include the perspective of others in their considerations.

From the perspective of Neo-Marxism, Berlin's belief in the human ability to compromise, to take the interests of others into account and to resolve value conflicts in a decent way would probably be judged as somewhat naive. Being aware of the ever-present material interests in our thinking, it is important for Neo-Marxists to have a proper decision theory when discussing conflicts. They insist on having clarity in procedures and a discourse ethics that diminishes the danger of power plays (cf., for instance, Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action). Berlin, who considered himself a historian of ideas and not a political theorist, did not offer his readers such and his essays give the impression that conflict resolution simply requires the application of practical wisdom.For Berlin as a value pluralist, moral conflict is not primarily caused by egoism or the lack of good

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answer the question: "How to reconcile the multiplicity of cultural traits with the supposed unity and singularity of any given culture considered as a whole?" (Winthrop1991: 54).

[16] See, for instance, Susan Moller-Okin who positively answered her own question: *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (1999).

communication but by the incompatibility of "good" values and the incommensurability of the standards for resolving these value conflicts. So, for Berlin, the essence of moral conflict is not a matter of communication but one of normativity. This makes it even more questionable as to whether Berlin's trust in the human ability to resolve value conflicts is justified.

Berlin's idea of a non-harmonious moral universe in which there are conflicts within the good, could equally have been combined with a much more negative view of human ability, such as humans as vicious animals who are driven by the will to power and always put their own material interests first. Berlin is not blind to human wickedness. There are wolves who, when granted too much liberty, will prey on the sheep. Yet, Berlin remains quite positive about the ability of humans to resolve value conflicts. With this optimism Berlin safeguards one of the most important prerequisites of a liberal, democratic and open society. If the world is truly occupied by purely egocentric beings who are unable to make compromises that transcend individual interests, strict authoritarianism for preventing a war of all against all is justified. (In chapter 7 we will deal further with Berlin's rather complicated view of evil.)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter we have focussed on value pluralism, Berlin's key thesis. It belongs to the human condition that human beings are confronted with value conflicts in their lives. Our moral universe is not harmonious and there is also conflict within the idea of the good. Due to limitations in time, space and means, values (or value systems) cannot always be combined in one life or one society (incompatibility). This leads to value conflicts. From Machiavelli, Vico and Herder Berlin learned that there is not only incompatibility between values (and value systems), but that there is also incommensurability. We have no universally valid higher standard to which we can refer to resolve these value conflicts.

Value conflicts are an important root of human misery for Berlin and therefore of evil. Due to the scarcity of resources, limitations in human existence and diversity in evaluative standards (in the moral, aesthetic and epistemological senses), all the ingredients for a great deal of conflict are present. Awareness of value pluralism, however, can resolve much of this conflict. Are these types of conflicts the sole

cause of moral evil for Berlin or are there other roots? We will pick up the theme of evil in chapter 7.

The anthropological consequence of Berlin's non-harmonious moral universe is that within human nature there are all kinds of irresolvable internal tensions. This leads him to characterise human nature as "crooked timber." These tensions within human nature are, in fact, tragic. They are often unintentional, yet they lead to all kinds of conflict that we would rather avoid but cannot. But there is also much that human beings can do to reduce the evil consequences of conflicts. Hate, resentment and demonisation could be reduced if people realise that there are usually two good but incompatible values (or value systems) at stake behind the conflict. Awareness that there is a conflict within the idea of the good could remove the sting from the conflict. Furthermore, humans can try to resolve the value conflicts they inevitably meet in their lives in a decent way. If possible, compromises and balances should be sought that divide the pain.

Berlin is optimistic with regard to the human ability to resolve value conflicts in this way. Human beings are, in principle, able to be tolerant and to make compromises. Yet there is a great deal of misery caused in the past by people who were blinded by monist beliefs. Especially within the twentieth century this denial of value pluralism has led to much unnecessary suffering. In the following chapter we will look more closely look at this tendency towards monism and fundamentalism.

The classical moral theories such as utilitarianism and deontology are for Berlin based on monism and are therefore of little use in resolving value conflicts. Furthermore, there are no fixed methods or procedures for finding solutions. What helps in finding compromises and in making tragic either/or choices is practical wisdom and a sense of reality. Berlin refers to certain elements of virtue ethics without adopting the Aristotelian paradigm. The problem that we have indicated is that Berlin's virtue ethics cannot do without a vision of the good either in which criteria of what constitutes virtuous behaviour are set. Thus, Berlin's virtue ethics draws tacitly on a vision of the good and in chapter 2.3 we will see that this is his own ideal of a decent society.

The absence of a universally valid standard does not, for Berlin, exclude the possibility of making reasoned value judgements. The criteria of rationality can still be met if coherence and consistency with personal life-plans or moral frameworks of one's community can be

shown. The drawback of this solution, however, is that it is a particularist one, thus removing the possibility of critique of the chosen priorities by outsiders. Berlin, who wants to distinguish his value pluralism from relativism, must still find a way to deal with this problem.

Another critical note I have made is that Berlin—quite inconsistently with his value pluralism—tacitly assumes a rather holistic view of the self and of culture in order to meet the rational criteria of consistency and coherence. Yet his value pluralism is tied to a much more fragmented view of the self. In chapter 4.4, on "identity formation," we will examine this holistic tendency in Berlin's thought further.

In this chapter we have also dealt with value conflicts on the political level between liberty and equality and within liberty and the positive and negative concepts of liberty. A problem that we have signalled is that according to Berlin's own value pluralist starting point, liberty is a value that has to compete with others and is not necessarily the highest value. There is no logical connection between value pluralism and liberalism. How can Berlin still protect his precious negative liberty? In chapter 3.1 and 6.3 we will come back to this problem.

CHAPTER 2

Without Hope for a Perfect World

In this chapter we will examine the political, academic and existential consequences of Berlin's rejection of the idea of a harmonious moral universe. Berlin is critical of worldviews that assume a deeper harmony behind the diversity in the world. The main political consequence of the belief in a non-harmonious and tragic moral universe is that a perfect society on earth, in the sense that all values can be harmoniously combined, becomes impossible. For Berlin, the pursuit of such a society, which is found in both secular and religious worldviews, is not only futile but also an important source of evil inflicted by humans (chapter 2.1). Berlin's anti-utopianism has consequences for the philosophy of history. There is no higher goal in history, so historical determinism, the (metaphysical) teleological outlook and the idea of progress are rejected (chapter 2.2). In Berlin's view, governments should be modest in attempting to realise a common goal and simply try to be decent (chapter 2.3). There are also existential consequences for the abandonment of the belief in a higher goal in history, such as giving up the notion of a higher meaning to life (chapter 2.4).

2.1 UTOPIANISM IN WESTERN THOUGHT

In Western thought, the idea of a perfectly harmonious society is for Berlin an old dream (CTH: 20). He describes the utopian dream as follows:

> A society lives in a state of pure harmony, in which all its members live in peace, love one another, are free from physical danger, from want of any kind, from insecurity, from degrading work, from envy, from frustration, experience no injustice or violence, live in perpetual, even light, in a temperate climate, in the midst of infinitely fruitful, generous nature. (CTH: 20)

In his 1978 essay "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West" (CTH: 20-49) Berlin not only gives a historical account of utopianism but also analyses its deeper roots and explains why the promised paradises on earth so often lead to hell.

Already in the writings of Homer, Plato and the Hebrew Bible Berlin recognised early forms of utopianism. The Greek world also generated several utopias after the city-state showed the first signs of decline. In the Roman Empire as well there were also attempts (by the Stoics) to institute utopias of a social egalitarian nature (CTH: 22). In these utopias the Golden Age is either to be found in the remote past or in the future, in the prophecy of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah who tells us that:

> "in the last days" men "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more …. The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid … the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose … and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." (CTH: 21)

Characteristic of most of these utopias is a notion of a broken unity and its restoration: "The constant theme which runs through all utopian thought, Christian and pagan alike, is that once upon a time there was a perfect state, then some enormous disaster took place" (CTH: 23). Berlin gives examples of such disasters from the story of Prometheus in Greek mythology and the fatal eating of the forbidden fruit in the Bible (CTH: 23). There is "a continuous attempt to piece together the fragments in order to restore serenity" (CTH: 23).

A distinct decline in utopias can be noted during the centuries because of the influence of Christian faith:

> …perhaps because according to Christian faith man cannot achieve perfection by his own unaided efforts; divine grace alone can save him—and salvation cannot come to him while he is on this earth, a creature born in sin. No man can build a lasting habitation in this vale of tears; for we are all but pilgrims here below, seeking to enter a kingdom not of this earth. (CTH: 23)

As a secularised Jew, Berlin feels that it is outside his competence to explain Christian dogmatics. Yet he must have had in mind the influence of Augustine of Hippo (354-430) who believed in the doctrine of original sin and for whom, because of the Fall of humanity, the Kingdom of God cannot be of this earth. This reduced the utopian zeal considerably, also when these insights were later adopted by Reformation theologians such as Luther and Calvin.

During the European Renaissance, utopianism proliferated again. For sixteenth- and seventeenth-century humanists (such as Dirck Coornhert 1522-90) the Reformational doctrine of original sin became a serious obstacle to their more optimistic belief in human competence and human dignity. These humanists (often still Christians) wanted to improve the quality of earthly existence and one of the ways in which they did this was through their utopian writings. Examples are Bacon's *New Atlantis* and Campanella's *City of the Sun* and "a dozen or so Christian Utopias of the 17th century" (CTH: 29).

The Enlightenment also produced utopian ideas. The fundamental doctrine of the Enlightenment is that scientific knowledge alone could save us from "the deplorable condition in which men have been forced to live too long" (CTH: 34). The discoveries of Galileo and Newton and the work of other mathematicians, physicists and biologists of genius led to the idea that their scientific methods could also be applied to "human matters, to morals, to politics, to the organisation of society" (CTH: 33). Berlin summarises the program of the Enlightenment thinkers as follows:

> One must scientifically find out what man consists of, and what he needs for his growth and for his satisfaction. When one had discovered what he is and what he requires, one will then ask where this last can be found; and then, by means of the appropriate inventions and discoveries, supply men's wants, and in this way, if not total perfection, at any rate a far happier and more rational state of affairs than at present prevails. (CTH: 34)

If French rationality and French way of life would be implemented everywhere, the world would then become harmonious.

The reaction to this Enlightenment utopianism came in Germany in the early nineteenth century. It was felt that their particular ways of life were crushed by the imposition of French Enlightenment universalism. It was Johann Gottfried Herder who claimed that values are not universal, but every people "possesses its own unique ideals, standards, ways of living and thought and action" (CTH: 37). Herder challenged the then current central Western assumption that "all true values are immutable and timeless and universal" (CTH: 40). For Berlin, Herder cleared the way for a more profound reason why utopias cannot be attained, namely the presence of moral and cultural diversity, including different ideas of what constitutes a perfect society:

> The idea of a single, perfect society of all mankind must be internally self-contradictory, because the Valhalla of the Germans is necessarily different from the ideal of future life of the French, because the paradise of the Muslims is not that of the Jews or Christians, because a society in which a Frenchman would attain to harmonious fulfilment is a society which to a German might prove suffocating. But if we are to have as many types of perfection as there are types of culture, each with its ideal constellation of virtues, then the very notion of the possibility of a single perfect society is logically incoherent. (CTH: 40)

In this quote Berlin calls the idea of a single perfect society internally self-contradictory and logically incoherent. For him, the concept of a common good,[17] valid for all humankind, rests on "a cardinal mistake," because the different values and moralities can be incompatible and in conflict with one another:

> … the notion that all values, all true answers to questions, are compatible with each other, cannot be true, since my values will inevitably clash with yours. As the values of the ancient Romans are not those of modern Italians, so the moral world of medieval Christianity is not that of liberal democrats, and above all, the world of the workers is not that of their employers. The concept of a common good, valid for all mankind, rests on a cardinal mistake. (CTH: 43)

Unfortunately, these conclusions were not immediately drawn and the consequences for the twentieth century were terrible.

In the nineteenth century, therefore, despite Herder's insights, new utopias were proposed. Hegel and, after him, Marx did not want to give up the possibility of a harmonious solution to the problems of humankind. They held to a "rational historical scheme" in which history was regarded as a march, as a "single ascent of mankind from barbarism to rational organisation" (CTH: 44). Hegel and Marx could not ignore the struggles and collisions in history, but they believed that these would ultimately be resolved.

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[17] Please note that for Berlin the term 'concept of a common good' is always connected with specific ideal for personal life or society that should be pursued by everyone, such as an egalitarian or theocratic society or a better afterlife. Strictly speaking, Berlin also holds to a concept of the common good himself, which is committed to values such as liberty and diversity, to allowing citizens and groups to pursue their own goals as much as possible (see further chapter 2.3).

> [The struggles and collisions] are due to the particular dialectic of self-development of the world-spirit, or of technical progress, which creates division of labour and class war; but these contradictions are the factors which themselves are indispensable to the forward movement that will culminate in a harmonious whole, the ultimate resolution of differences in unity, whether conceived as an infinite progress towards a transcendent goal, as in Hegel, or an attainable rational society, as in Marx. (CTH: 44)

The moral universe of Hegel allows for struggles and conflicts, but these are believed to be a temporary stage on the road to the total self-fulfilment of humankind. Utopian thinkers in the tradition of Hegel and Marx were inspired by this happy ending of the human story and pursued the ideal of a "peaceful anarchy in which men are rational, co-operative, virtuous, happy and free" (CTH: 44). Especially in the twentieth century these utopian dreams caused tremendous misery. The ideal of a classless welfare state justified the imprisonment and execution of citizens and dissidents who dared to stand in the way of the envisioned perfect society.

At the end of his life Berlin witnessed the Iranian revolution and the rise of the Mullahcracy with great concern (Jahanbegloo 1992: 23). He feared the idea of a harmonious Islamic world community (*umma)* under the strict guidance of the *shari'a*, a utopian dream that would again attempt to justify severe limitations of freedom and the sacrifice of innocent lives.

The focus of Berlin's anti-utopianism has mainly been seekers of earthly paradises. He did not think that all religions necessarily lead to the fanatical defence of monist truth and the establishment of utopias on earth. This was very much dependent on their epistemology. Religions that profess the impossibility of fully knowing the will of God are, for Berlin, usually less fanatic. The violence connected with the defence of the monist teleological outlook is more likely to be found in religions where the leaders claim to know exactly what God's blueprints are for establishing a perfect society on earth.

In his analysis of utopianism Berlin recognised that the basic assumption behind this way of thinking is that human beings have a common purpose that leads to human fulfilment. This assumption is

combined with a reaffirmation of the ancient (Platonic) doctrine that "virtue is knowledge."[18] This notion means

> …that if you know the good for man, you cannot, if you are a rational being, live in any way other than that whereby fulfilment is that towards which all desires, hopes, prayers, aspirations are directed; that is what is meant by calling them hopes. To distinguish reality from appearance, to distinguish that which will truly fulfil a man from that which merely appears to promise to do so, that is knowledge, and that alone will save him. (CTH: 29)

Here knowledge in the full sense is meant: not just descriptive knowledge but also knowledge of how to live and which forms of life are the best and most worthy (CTH: 28) "Man's nature could be fully realised if only he knew what he truly wanted" (CTH: 28). This knowledge leads to human fulfilment and will make human beings happy, just, virtuous or wise (CTH: 28). But, for Berlin, human beings have no true common purpose. There is not only too much diversity in the world with respect to how life should be lived, but there is also diversity within the good itself, which leads to difficult dilemmas and choices. Human fulfilment in the sense of a perfect life is, for Berlin, impossible. Yet the idea that we have a common purpose is quite a persistent one in human thought.

2.2 NO HIGHER GOAL IN HISTORY

Berlin's anti-utopianism has consequences for the philosophy of history, namely the rejection of historical determinism, the (meta-physical) teleological outlook and the linear view of progress in the explanation of history.

The Rejection of Historical Determinism

For Berlin, historical determinism is an error that occurs when regularities in historical events are confused with fixed (scientific) laws (Jahanbegloo 1992: 34). The same argument was used by Karl Popper who rejected historical determinism in his *The Poverty of Historicism*

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[18] The Platonic (Socratic) doctrine "virtue is knowledge" also assumes that when people commit crimes they do so because they are in error: they are mistaken in what they think will benefit them. "If they truly knew what would profit them, they would not do these destructive things" (CTH: 28). We will discuss this aspect of the 'Socratic fallacy' in chapter 7.1.

(1944). The reason why Berlin objects to historical determinism is that it is the engine that fuels the hope of a utopia. We can raise our hopes and motivate ourselves to accomplish the envisioned heaven on earth because it will inevitably take place in the future. In Berlin's view, historical determinism is also a false idea since it ignores the influence of free will and the fact that human beings are creatures with purposes and motives. For Berlin, history can never be predictable, because of the influence of human free will.

Criticism of the (Metaphysical) Teleological Outlook

In section 2.1 we saw how the ideas of common purpose and human fulfilment play a role in utopianism. These ideas are part of the teleological outlook. Berlin defines the teleological outlook as follows:

> [The teleological outlook] occurs in many versions, but what is common to them all is the belief that men, and all living creatures and perhaps inanimate things as well, not merely are as they are, but have functions and pursue purposes. These purposes are either imposed upon them by a creator who has made every person and thing to serve each a specific goal; or else these purposes are not, indeed, imposed by a creator but are, as it were, internal to their possessors, so that every entity has a "nature" and pursues a specific goal which is "natural" to it, and the measure of its perfection consists in the degree to which it fulfils it. (FEL: 51; L: 104)

In the above definition Berlin describes a type of teleology that we may characterise as metaphysical. Specific goals and potentials are pre-given either by God or by nature and should be realised in personal life and/or history. When Berlin uses the term teleology, he is always referring to this metaphysical type. There is also another type of teleology in which it is assumed that people set their goals in life themselves. To distinguish from metaphysical teleology, we may call this type subjective teleology. In this study we will see (chapter 3.1 that Berlin holds this subjective type of teleology himself but does not recognise it as teleological.[19]

As a historian of ideas Berlin recognises that (metaphysical) teleology has often been applied to views of history, especially those developed by historians inspired Hegel and Marx. Berlin rejects this

[19] The distinction between metaphysical and subjective forms of teleology and meaning can be found in Stoker 1996,149.

outlook in which it is believed that human history has a (higher) purpose. For historians with a teleological framework, the universe has a goal and every event has a place within a universal pattern. For them, to understand history is to perceive this pattern, to reveal this cosmic plan and to show how an event fulfils this purpose. For Berlin, the teleological outlook distorts historical explanation, as a historian is expected to explain an event in terms of the higher goal in the universe. Things and events that do not fit into this plan are rejected *a priori* and are given no further explanation (FEL: 53; L: 105). History, in all its complexity and diversity, is pressed into a narrow straitjacket. Another serious objection that Berlin has to the metaphysical teleological outlook in historical explanation is that it denies individual responsibility and free choices. It reduces human beings to the status puppets or marionettes in a inevitable process (FEL,54), L,107). It makes the notion of the individual's freedom of choice ultimately illusory (FEL: 58; L. 110). And last but not least, if the teleological outlook is connected with monism and utopianism, the sacrifice of individuals in the name of some higher goal is legitimised.

This metaphysical teleology has a strong appeal for people, since it gives meaning to life and history as a whole. It satisfies "the craving to know not merely why the world exists, but why it is worthy of existence; and why it is this particular world that exists, rather than some other, or no world at all" (FEL: 58; L: 110). Berlin sees "a deep human desire to find a unitary pattern in which the whole of experience is symmetrically ordered." People want to escape from an untidy, cruel and seemingly purposeless world and look for answers to the puzzle (FEL: 106; L: 155). Berlin sees a strong connection between the teleological outlook as expressed in Marxism and secularisation. Teleology (in its metaphysical form) is an alternative for many of those who have lost faith in the older religious orthodoxies (FEL: 114; L: 162).

For Berlin, this teleological view is not a theory or a hypothesis but a category or framework in terms of which everything is or should be conceived and described (FEL: 53; L: 105). Berlin also calls the teleological outlook "a form of faith" that is hard to refute by any kind of experience. Berlin realises that it is hard to convince the teleological thinker, who is caught up by faith in a higher meaning to history.

Progress as "a Painful Spiral"

Berlin's anti-teleological outlook also leads him to question whether there is progress in history and whether history follows a linear pattern. Before Berlin, Vico and Herder had already raised questions with regard to seeing history as a linear progression. Herder, for instance, saw history as "a succession of distinct and heterogeneous civilisations and not steps to some more perfect way of life" (TCE: 18). Herder did not believe in "the myth of steady progress" (TCE: 215) and rejected the Enlightenment view that saw each civilisation as a steppingstone to a higher one. As each society, each culture, develops in its own way there is no progress, only *Fortgang* (continuation). This is an internal development of a culture in its own habitat, towards its own goals. In Vico's view, the history of cultures in one of cycles in which

> all nations are destined to pass through the same cycles of culture: from savagery to barbarism and stern oligarchy, followed by Plutocracy, democracy, freedom of speech, scepticism, decadence; from piety, severity, discipline through growing permissiveness and luxury to collapse. (POI: 62)

Berlin himself does not regard history as fully cyclical. For him nothing ever goes completely back to its starting-point.

What is Berlin's own view? He sees some progress in humanity and compares it to a "painful spiral" (CTH: 202). Nations can learn from experience. Even from the holocaust of the twentieth century something was learned. With this spiral view of history Berlin can reject linear progress in history without ignoring the human capacity for development. This development is, for Berlin, not an inexorable movement towards a single, universal goal but a rise from a "barbarous state" into a civilisation (Berlin 1983: 389). Berlin may express here typically Western ideas of "barbarian" and "civilised," but it is more important to note that his anti-teleological and non-linear position does not rule out the human capacity to improve life. People can learn from their mistakes and in this way Berlin shows the humanist strand in his thought.

2.3 THE AIM OF GOVERNMENT: A DECENT SOCIETY

What, in Berlin's view, is the best way to govern societies that are characterised by value pluralism? How can peace be secured in soci-

eties in which there is cultural and moral diversity and conflicts both within and between moral frameworks? As a historian of ideas, Berlin did not regard it as his task to offer his readers a 'ready to use' political philosophy. Yet his essays give some a rough sketch of what he envisions as 'a decent society' and the obligations of a government of a society that could be torn by different opinions and value conflicts.

The first obligation of a decent society, according to Berlin, is "to avoid extremes of suffering" (CTH: 17). A decent government should observe basic rules prohibiting homicide, genocide, unfair trials, torture, barbarism and massacres (FEL: 166; L: 211). For Berlin, these basic rules are shared by all "normal" human beings. He actually claims universality for them (as we will see in chapter 6).

The second requirement for a decent government is "to maintain a precarious equilibrium that will prevent the occurrence of desperate situations, of intolerable choice" (CTH: 18). For example, Antigone should never have been confronted with the cruel dilemma of either burying her brother or obeying the decree of King Creon. The best thing a decent government can do is :

> … try to promote some kind of equilibrium, necessarily unstable, between the different aspirations of differing groups of human beings—at the very least to prevent them from attempting to exterminate each other, and, so far as possible, to prevent them from hurting each other—and to promote the maximum practicable degree of sympathy and understanding, never likely to be complete, between them (CTH: 47)

In a decent society the effects of social and political conflicts can be minimised "by promoting and preserving an uneasy equilibrium, which is constantly threatened and in constant need of repair" (CTH: 19). Thus, decent governors should be aware of the the value pluralist situation, including the perennial presence of value conflicts, and be willing to find compromises to divide the pain.

The third requirement that Berlin mentions is that governments should give "each human group sufficient room to realise its own idiosyncratic, unique particular ends without too much interference with the ends of others" (CTH: 47). This requirement could be understood as the classical liberal position in which governments should intervene as little as possible as long as groups or citizens do not harm or damage others. In Berlin's concept of a decent society, however, this

liberal requirement is more complicated. In chapter 1.3 we have seen that, for Berlin, liberty is a value that has to compete with other values and cannot always have priority. Negative liberty can be traded in to realise other (community-based) values such as public health, security, education or the prevention of poverty. What Berlin rejects is governments imposing a specific vision of the common good that contains an ideal for society (such as a Mullahcracy or perfect equality) that is to be valid for all citizens and groups. In that case governments then interfere in the attempts of human beings and groups who do not share that vision of the good to pursue their own goals in life.

It could be argued that Berlin also holds to a concept of the common good. He hopes that the above requirements of a decent society are commonly accepted. This seems to lead to an inconsistency in Berlin's thoughts. Did Berlin not say that due to pluralism "concepts of a common good, valid for all mankind, rest on a cardinal mistake" (CTH, 43)? And is not he trying to impose his own vision of the common good on others?

To see if there is an inconsistency here, we first have to look at how Berlin himself understands the term 'concept of a common good'. In his essays we see that this term is always closely connected with specific ideals such as an egalitarian or theocratic society. Such common ideals have a specific content that is held as being valid to all (CTH, 40, 43). Within Berlin's ideal of a decent society there are also values, such as liberty, tolerence, respect for diversity, commitment to peace. These values have a more instrumental nature, helping groups and citizens to pursue their own values as much as possible. Berlin therefore does not recognise his own concept of a decent society to be a 'concept of a common good'. Berlin does realise, however, that his notion of a decent society is thicker than just compliance with a set of basic rules and is not neutral in comparison with "extreme outlooks like fascism and communism" (Quinton:1955,517). In today's Rawlsian inspired political terminology, Berlin's views would be called "approximately neutral."

Furthermore, Berlin is also aware that in a value pluralist moral universe the pursuit of his own 'ideal' also requires that somewhere sacrifices have to be made. In order to secure a peaceful coexistence, Berlin is ready to accept this.

The first sacrifice in Berlin's priority of (negative) liberty) is the acceptance of non-perfection. The absence of too much government interference means that a number of individuals or groups will not use

their liberty in the way we ourselves regard as wise or good. There will be deviating visions of the good in society, ranging from religious to hedonist ones, and that will not always form a harmonious whole. People can even choose voluntarily to lead risky lifestyles or ruin their own lives. (See also chapter 1.1 about non-perfectionalism).

Especially when he grew older, Berlin realised that his preference for values such as tolerance and respect also required a (second) sacrifice with regard to the diversity he so much cherishes. The views of extremists and fanatics who do not tolerate and respect others cannot themselves be tolerated in a decent society seeking peaceful co-existence. Not all diversity be accommodated and in chapter 4.5 we will see that a certain integration or assimilation of newcomers cannot be avoided.

With this ideal of a decent society, Berlin does not only have some guidelines for the government of a pluralist society, he also has a modest moral framework with the standards and criteria for his own version of 'virtue ethics' (see chapter 1.4). It enables him, for instance, to judge in his *Personal Impressions* (1998) whether political leaders have shown enough practical wisdom or sense of reality in resolving difficult value conflicts, especially in times of war and revolution. In fact, in his essays this moral framework is always tacitly or explicitly present when judgements are being made.

Berlin recognises that his concept of a decent society is an 'ideal'. He admits immediately that it is not a "wildly exciting program" that will make hearts beat faster:

> A little dull as a solution, you will say? Not the stuff of which calls to heroic action by inspired leaders are made? Yet if there is some truth in this view, perhaps that is sufficient. An eminent American philosopher of our day once said, "There is no a priori reason for supposing that the truth, when it is discovered, will necessarily prove interesting." (CTH: 19)

2.4 No Higher Meaning to Life

This section concerns the existential consequences of abandoning the idea of a perfect society. History will become "senseless" without any higher meaning. Individual lives do not have a part to play in some historical drama. Also, there is no hope that our conflicts will ever cease. There will always be tensions and collisions, even among people who think and act reasonably. In this section we will see that for

Berlin this insight does not lead to an existential or nihilist crisis. With the help of Alexander Herzen, Berlin shows that a worthwhile life can still be lived. The quality of that life would even be improved, as people will stop sacrificing the present for some distant good that can never be attained. In this section this "optimistic" view is compared with the much more pessimistic Nietzschean notion of a nihilist crisis.

Meaning as Purpose

Berlin finds the question: "What is the meaning of life?" a rather confusing one. In English the term "meaning" has different connotations. Berlin understands this term mainly in a (metaphysical) teleological sense. In a 1978 BBC interview with Brian Magee Berlin says that when someone asks about the meaning of life, he or she probably means the *purpose* of life (Magee 1978: 34). The question is derived from the old teleologcal belief that everything in the universe had a purpose because everything and every creature had been made with a purpose either by God or by nature (Magee 1978:34).

Personally, Berlin does not believe that there is any higher purpose or meaning in life. In a personal letter he writes the following:

> As for the meaning of life, I do not believe that it has any. I do not at all ask what it is, but I suspect it has none and this is a source of great comfort to me. We make of it what we can and that is all there is about it. Those who seek for some deep cosmic all embracing …. libretto or God are, believe me, pathetically mistaken. (Ignatieff 1999: 279; IB to an unknown correspondent, (20.11.84)).

Instead of the "meaning of life," Berlin prefers the phrase "the best moments in life." In the closing section of his essay "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century" (1950) Berlin writes that people do not live only by fighting evils. They also

> … live by positive goals, individual and collective, a vast variety of them, seldom predictable, at times incompatible. It is from intense preoccupation with these ends, ultimate, incommensurable, guaranteed neither to change nor to stand still … that *the best moments come in the lives* of individuals and peoples. (FEL: 40; L: 93; Italics mine)

The best moments in life are the product of the pursuit of positive goals. Human beings pursue goals and this is also a form of teleological thinking. Yet it is a subjective teleology as the goals are not pre-given but chosen.

The most important source for fighting the imposition of an idea of a higher meaning to life is, for Berlin, the positive heritage of the Romantic movement that is still "vivid in our present conception of man" (CTH: 199). Most Romantics took the Kantian idea seriously that a human being should be treated as "an end in himself and not as a means to an end" (CTH: 199). Therefore they should "not be slaughtered in the name of anything higher than himself" (CTH: 199). Thus, people may not "be slaughtered, either in name of abstract ideas, however lofty, such as progress of freedom of humanity, or of institutions, for none of these have absolute value in themselves" (CTH: 199). The Romantics saw that the belief in a higher purpose or meaning justifies the sacrifice of individuals in the name of some abstract idea. The "meaning" of life should therefore no longer be sought in abstract ideas but in individual lives themselves.

Alexander Herzen and the Meaning of Life

One of the Russian humanists that inspired Berlin most in his ideas about the meaning of life was Alexander Herzen, a nineteenth-century journalist. Berlin wrote introductions to Alexander Herzen's books (*From the Other Shore; My Past and Thoughts).* Herzen rejects the idea that there is an overall end of life which can be called *the* end of life. The questions "What is *the* end (or *the* meaning) of life?" or "What is *the* pattern of human history?" are for Herzen misconceived questions because "Ends, patterns, meanings, causes differ with the situation and outlook and needs of the questioner and can be correctly and clearly formulated only if these are made part of the question" (POI: 101). Here we see Herzen's awareness of pluralism with regard to ideas about what constitutes the end of life or pattern in history.

Having witnessed the revolutions of 1848, Herzen came to the conclusion that nature and history are "full of the accidental and senseless, of muddle and bungling" (AC: 206). There is no higher meaning in life and the present should therefore not be sacrificed to a distant end:

> He [Herzen] believed that the ultimate goal of life was life itself; that the day and the hour were ends in themselves, not a means to another day or another experience. He believed that remote ends were a dream that faith in them was a fatal illusion; that to sacrifice the present or the immediate and foreseeable future to these distant ends must always lead to cruel and futile forms of human sacrifice. (AC: 211)

Herzen could reach this conclusion because, under influence of the Romantic heritage, he had already given up the belief in an eternal realm of objective values and embraced the idea that values are human creations:

> [Herzen] believed that values were not found in an impersonal, objective realm, but were created by human beings, changed with the generations of men, but were none the less binding upon those who lived in their light; that suffering was inescapable, and infallible knowledge neither attainable nor needed. (AC: 211)

We also see here a quite optimistic view with regard to the consequences of a general awareness that values are human creations. These man-made artefacts would still be considered as generally binding.

Herzen also inspired Berlin in his reflections on the meaning of death. The inevitability of death could make life meaningless, but Herzen advised us to look at the life of a child: "We think that the purpose of the child is to grow up because it does grow up. But its purpose is to play, to enjoy itself, to be a child. If we merely look to the end of the process, the purpose of all life is death" (RT: 196). Death is a mystery we have to accept, but it does not make life meaningless. Herzen compared the meaning of life with the meaning of looking at a flower or singing a song: "Of what use to the flower is its bright magnificent bloom? Or this intoxicating scent, since it will only pass away" (RT: 195)? He asks further:

> What is the purpose of the song the singer sings? If you look beyond your pleasure in it for something else, for some other goal, the moment will come when the singer stops and then you will only have memories and vain regrets, because, instead of listening, you were waiting for something else…. (RT: 196)

Death, therefore, does not make life absurd, as later existentialists such as Albert Camus or Samuel Beckett (who were more influenced by Nietzsche) have claimed.

In an interview in the *London Times* Berlin speaks about his own death. He declares that, although he would like it to be otherwise, the idea that there was some world in which there would be perfect truth, love, justice and happiness made no sense in any conceptual scheme he knew. It was just a comforting idea for people who could not face the possibility of total extinction. But he adds, "I wouldn't mind living

on and on. I am filled with curiosity and long to know, what next?" (F&L: 141).

Contra Nietzsche

The idea that life has no higher meaning could be regarded as a form of nihilism. How does Berlin's nihilism compare with that of Nietzsche? Both Nietzsche and Berlin reject the metaphysical attribution of meaning. Each did so, however, for different reasons. For Berlin, the metaphysics that is present in the Marxist inheritance (the metaphysical teleology) leads to a determinist view of history and of human nature. His main objection is that this is a denial of human freedom and choice. Also for Berlin, historical determinism feeds utopianism and denies the existence of value pluralism. For Nietzsche, metaphysics is rejected because it is a product of weak persons who create true and eternal worlds (Platonism) or a God (Christianity) to deal with a tension- and misery-filled life. Nietzsche's main objection to metaphysics is that it is a manifestation of decadence that should be conquered by a strong will to power. There is also a difference in the way both thinkers believe that the attribution of a higher meaning can be overcome. For Nietzsche, this is the moment when a strong person (an *Übermensch*) accepts the full consequences of the "death of God," i.e. infinite meaninglessness (Stoker 1996: 109). For Berlin, only the desire to seek higher meaning should be overcome. He recognises that this is difficult, as it is a "deep and incurable metaphysical need." Yet it is also a sign of "moral and political immaturity" that can be overcome (L: 217; FEL: 172). Through Alexander Herzen Berlin aims to show that, even without a higher (metaphysical) purpose, (subjective) meaning can still be found in personal lives.

Another important difference is found in their respective views of morality after the "death of God." Nietzsche believes that strong persons would see and realise that the world truly is immoral. Accepting infinite meaninglessness includes the denial of a moral horizon. In *The Gay Science*, for instance, we read that Nietzsche's madman, after having declared the "death of God," desperately shouts: "Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon?" (*The Gay Science*, aphorism 125). In chapter 6 we will see that Berlin still holds on to the belief in the presence of a horizon with some absolute norms and values, despite the fact that there is no objective heaven to secure them. In the moral sense human beings can become mature and abandon

"their cravings for the certainties of childhood" and regard their norms and values as binding (L: 271; FEL: 172). (See further chapter 6.)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

At the end of this chapter we are left with a human being who lives in a non-harmonious moral universe, in which there are conflicts within the good. Because of pluralism there are also no universally valid criteria available to resolve these conflicts. There is no hope for a perfect society in which these conflicts would not occur. Utopianism is not only senseless but has also been important sources of human misery and oppression. We could conclude that, with these insights, Berlin anticipated in the 1950s the postmodern end of the "meta-narratives" and "grand schemes." History is, for Berlin, nothing more than a "painful spiral" with only moderate possibilities for improvement.

Berlin recognises that it is difficult to give up the (metaphysical) belief in a higher goal in history and the hope for a perfect society. Especially in twentieth-century Europe secularised people have easily fallen into the utopian trap, leading to totalitarianism and the most violent century ever. Berlin is, however, fully confident that human beings can reach an existential maturity and pursue meaningful lives without the prospect of a higher goal or a life hereafter. He trusts that the full nihilist consequences of his anti-utopianism can be overcome.

To secure a peaceful coexistence in a (value) pluralist society, Berlin gives some rough guidelines. Instead of realising a utopia or imposing some vision of the good, governments of pluralistic societies should be modest and seek only to be decent. We have seen that Berlin's concept of a decent society functions in fact also as a quite modest common "vision of the good". Furthermore, it provides criteria by which politicians can be judged as wise according to Berlin's "virtue ethics."

Berlin's anti-utopianism does not mean that people should stop trying to improve their situation on earth. The ameliorations, however, should be modest. The goal should only be a decent society that offers enough freedom to respect diversity, is aware of the perennial presence of value conflicts and seeks to divide the ever present pain as justly as possible. Berlin recognises that, in comparison with the pursuit of a perfect society, the aim for "just" a decent society is quite dull: "Not the stuff of which calls to heroic action by inspired leaders are made" (CTH: 19).

Value Pluralism and the Ecological Crisis

Recently there have been calls to rehabilitate utopianism. Representatives of Green political parties and the environmental movement feel that we need ecological utopias (ecotopias) to reach a sustainable future (see, for instance, Geus:1999). We can simply no longer afford to continue the *laissez-faire* attitude that is connected with anti-utopianism. Also, according to the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, we cannot do without utopianism. The world is threatened by nuclear weapons, overpopulation, the globalised labour market and environmental disasters. We therefore need a "global egalitarian utopia" and reinforcement of our ability to imagine (Rorty 1999: 233).[20]

Berlin, who died in 1997, did not witness many of these developments, but he would surely have feared the eco-dictatorship to which such utopias could lead. Like Karl Popper, he preferred piecemeal engineering, not only for the reason that we human beings are fallible but also because we are bound to encounter value conflicts within the good. This piecemeal approach may, however, turn out to be too gradual and too slow.

From a value pluralist perspective, the ecological threat could also be regarded as a major value conflict, with liberty on the one hand and sustainability on the other hand. Whatever we choose, we will have to pay a heavy price and sacrifice values that are dear to us. The picture of a sustainable society that ecotopists envision is too harmonious. A sustainable economy will probably not be regarded as a happy sharing of the resources of equal people, as is often believed by the Greens, but a serious limitation of freedom and other values such as equality. Because the ecological crisis is not only caused by capitalism or overconsumption but also by overpopulation, forced family planning cannot be avoided. Certain environmentally unfriendly (often traditional) means of living will have to cease, leading to poverty for some

[20] Rorty's utopia is a continuation of the utopia that filled most Western people's imagination at the end of the Second World War and includes the values of democracy, liberty, peace, technical progress, economic prosperity and equality of opportunity (Rorty 1999: 230). This was the great narrative behind the Charter of the United Nations. Rorty criticises the actual results of this utopia as it has not succeeded in providing equal opportunity for many people in the world. On the contrary, it has led to ghettos in America and a global division between overclasses and underclasses. Rorty's "global egalitarian utopia" should provide the narrative of progress for the future.

groups. Polluting activities such as flying and driving will have to be made extremely expensive in order to meet the ecological costs and will therefore no longer available to the lower income groups. Such interventions will affect the most private realms of people and will consequently encounter a great deal of (political) resistance. We are dealing here with a (tragic) value conflict that we would rather ignore and a choice that we would rather avoid but in the end cannot.

CHAPTER 3

A Pursuer of Ends

In the first two chapters we have seen how Berlin characterises the moral order that surrounds us: its nature is non-harmonious. Within the good itself there can be conflicts. The absence of a universally valid method of weighing different moral choices makes it important that human beings be able to decide for themselves which value should receive priority. Individual choice becomes more important. In this chapter we will therefore examine the aspects of human nature connected with the power of choice. The power of choice itself assumes that human beings pursue ends. This is one of the most basic characteristics Berlin attributes to human nature. In his essay "The Concept of Scientific History" (1960) we find that Berlin defines human beings as "…active beings, pursuing ends, shaping their own and others' lives, feeling, reflecting, imagining, creating, in constant interaction and intercommunication with other human beings …" (CC: 133). In (metaphysical) teleological views, which Berlin rejects, the ends are pre-given. In Berlin's view of human nature, human beings determine their own goals. This characterisation of human nature, including the power of choice and the ability to create or follow existing values will be central to this chapter.

3.1 A Pursuer of Ends with the Power of Choice

For Berlin, the human being is first of all "a pursuer of ends." The words that he uses for this basic characterisation look simple but are nevertheless carefully chosen. Let us look first at the word "ends." An end is simply something one seeks to attain. This need not be a "value," although in many cases the ends that are pursued imply values. By using the word "ends," we include things or values that are either instrumentally or intrinsically valuable to us. The words "ends" also refers to the various purposes human beings seek to achieve. For Berlin, the ends are plural, not single. This is no coincidence. We have seen in the previous chapter that for Berlin there is no single or highest end in life. Berlin uses the rather neutral word "pursue." Later in this chapter we will see that this term is a solution for the philosophical problem that arose after the Romantic period, namely the

question of whether values are created by human beings or discovered in some objective realm.

The phrase "a pursuer of ends" does not mention any specific value or goal, such as "seeking happiness and avoiding pain." Berlin realizes that such an aim could not be universal. In the BBC interview with Bryan Magee, Berlin argues that seeking happiness is not necessarily a goal for religious people:

> I seem to remember reading somewhere that when somebody said to Luther that men were entitled to happiness, or that the goal of life was happiness, he said: 'Happiness? No! *Leiden! Leiden! Kreuz! Kreuz!'* ('Suffering, suffering; the Cross, the Cross'.) This is at the heart of certain forms of Christian religion, one of the deepest beliefs, vision of reality, on which a very large number of exceedingly unshallow human beings have built their lives. (Magee 1978: 22)

It is important to note that Berlin complies here with one of the basics of liberal theory, namely the assumption of the human capacity to form, revise and pursue a conception of the good rationally. This ability consists simply of pursuing anything that people regard as valuable in their lives. This conception of the good need not be fixed or determined and can change over the course of life.

The Power of Choice

When Berlin defines human beings as "pursuers of ends," he connects this with the characterisation that humans are armed with the power of choice (L: 339). For Berlin, our whole way of thinking becomes meaningless "unless we think of human beings as capable of pursuing ends for their own sake by deliberate acts of choice" (L: 337). Without this power of choice, it would be hard to call humans human beings at all.

Berlin knows that the power of choice can be seriously obstructed. Yet there is always a choice that can be made. To show this, Berlin refers to an imagined discussion, inspired by the Eichmann trial in 1961 which he followed with close attention:

> When Eichmann says "I killed Jews because I was ordered to; if I had not done it I would have been killed myself" one can say: "I see that it is improbable that you would have chosen to be killed, but in principle you could have done it if you had decided to do it—there was no literal compulsion, as there is in nature, which caused you to act as

> you did." You may say it is unreasonable to expect people to behave like that when facing great dangers: so it is, but however unlikely it may be that they should decide to do so, in the literal sense of the wor3d they *could* have chosen to do so. Martyrdom cannot be expected, but can be accepted, against whatever odds—indeed, that is why it is so greatly admired. (POI: 20)

There are always at least two possibilities between which one can choose. It is a choice that cannot be avoided, even if there is hardly any (negative) freedom at all.

Doomed to Choose

From a value pluralist perspective, Berlin regards it is as an "inescapable characteristic of the human condition" that we have to choose "between absolute claims" (FEL: 169; L: 214). The power of choice can also be a burden. Choices between conflicting values cannot be evaded. Like Jean Paul Sartre, Berlin holds "we are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss" (CTH: 13).

Berlin shares with the existentialists not only the idea that human beings are "doomed to choose" but also that they are likely to evade responsibility. Making choices has consequences for both personal lives and the lives of others. Decisions in value conflicts mean sacrifices. The responsibility connected with our choices can be hard to bear and therefore people tend to look for excuses and alibis. One of the ways to look for excuses is to refer to social and psychological determinist theories:

> By [the existentialists] it is maintained that far more is a matter of human choice than has usually and complacently been supposed. Since choice involves responsibility, and some human beings at most times, and most human beings at some times, wish to avoid this burden, there is a tendency to look for excuses and alibis. For this reason men tend to attribute too much to the unavoidable operations of natural or social laws—for instance the workings of the unconscious mind, or unalterable psychological reflexes, or the laws of social evolution. (CC: 176)

The fact that we are doomed to choose means that the power of choice itself is an element within human nature that is pre-given. It is beyond our manipulation. We see here an example of a subjective type of teleology. It is teleological because it includes a clear purpose in life,

namely the pursuit of (individually chosen) values and ends. For this purpose, human beings are endowed (by nature) with the power of choice. This purpose in life is in fact also pre-given. It even cannot be escaped, we have to choose—we are even doomed to choose. The main difference of this teleology from metaphysical teleology is the content of the values and ends that have to be pursued; they are not pre-given and have to be set by people themselves.

Not Determined but Free

Human beings are often shaped by their environment. It is therefore possible to characterise them as "socially, psychologically, naturally and historically determined by factors genuinely and permanently outside their control" (CC: 179). Yet for Berlin, freedom is not entirely cancelled by these factors. Berlin wants to avoid a deterministic view of human nature because this leads to the idea that "mankind is no more than a species of the animal kingdom" who do not know "the difference between action and behaviour" and this could lead to the danger that fellow human beings are treated "as less than human" (CTH: 86), a consequence that the twentieth century has painfully shown.

How does Berlin defend the idea that human beings are not completely determined? For his secular "free will defence" Berlin uses an argument that he attributes to Kant. If human beings are completely determined, they could not be held responsible for their actions and could not be subject to moral praise or condemnation:

> There is no merit in choosing what is right unless it is possible to choose what is wrong. Creatures who are determined, by whatever causes, into perpetually choosing that which is good and beautiful and true could claim no merit for doing so, for however noble the results, the action would be automatic. Therefore Kant supposed that the whole notion of moral merit, the whole notion of moral desert, the whole notion which is entailed by the fact that we praise and we blame, that we consider that human beings are to be congratulated or condemned for acting in this or that way, presuppose the fact that they are able freely to choose. (RR: 70)

If people are completely determined, the attribution of moral responsibility would, in fact, be inappropriate. Berlin refers to the use of (ordinary) language in which admiring or condemning would become senseless if all our acts are determined.

In religions and secular worldviews such as Islam, Calvinism and Marxism[21] Berlin notices a tendency towards determinism and fatalism. He also notices an inconsistency in their belief in the omnipotence and omniscience of Providence and its control over every human step on the one hand and the fact that nevertheless they have moral responsibility on the other:

> Fatalism has not bred passivity in Moslems, nor has determinism sapped the vigour of Calvinists or Marxists, although some Marxists feared that it might. Practice sometimes belies profession, no matter how sincerely held. (FEL: xvii; L: 10)

Respect for the Power of Choice

For Berlin, it is important that the human power of choice be respected and not destroyed. Human beings should be allowed to have a certain area in which they can act without obstruction (negative liberty). Berlin finds an ally in Kant. He agrees strongly with Kant that "to deprive a human being of his power of choice is to do him the greatest imaginable injury" and it is "a source of exploitation, humiliation, degradation and dehumanisation" (SR: 237). To safeguard the respect of the power of choice, Berlin refers to the Kantian idea that human beings should not be treated as means but as ends in themselves.[22] In his personal letter to George Kennan (1951), Berlin writes:

> The whole of the Kantian morality (and I don't know about Catholics, but Protestants, Jews, Muslims and high-minded atheists believe it) lies in this; the mysterious phrase about men being "ends in themselves" to which much lip-service has been paid, with not much attempt to explain it, seems to lie in this: that every human being is as-

[21] In 1939 Berlin wrote *Karl Marx. His Life and Environment*. In his chapter on historical determinism Berlin writes that Marx' conception of human freedom is not clear and even contradictory. According to Berlin, Marx held that human choices are not mechanically determined and that human choices can affect the course of events. But support is also possible for the alternative view that human actions are determined by objective (scientifically predictable) laws. Many of Marx' successors followed the deterministic interpretation (See MARX: 102-04).

[22] The English translation to which Berlin refers read as follows: "For, all rational beings stand under the law that each of them is to treat himself and all others never merely as means but always at the same time as ends in themselves" Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:434.

> sumed to possess the capacity to choose what to do, and what to be, however narrow the limits within which his choice may lie, however hemmed in by circumstances beyond his control; that all human love and respect rest upon the attribution of conscious motives in this sense. (L: 337)

In the history of ideas the Kantian idea that human beings are “ends in themselves” has been successfully received in both the secular and religious world yet detached from its original context. The explanation that Kant himself gave in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) is indeed rather “mysterious.” Kant attributes dignity to human beings because they are the ones that determine the worth of values and ends: “What has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity” (*Groundwork* 4: 335). Human beings themselves are ends in themselves and therefore have dignity. In the history of ideas after Kant, this mysterious justification of this idea has not prevented “much lip-service” being paid to that phrase. The idea that people should be treated as “ends in themselves” is usually connected with the recognition that human beings have the power to choose and the ability to attribute conscious motives. [23]

Berlin himself has difficulties with accepting the original philosophical setting in which Kant expressed his ideas. In most academic interpretations of *Groundwork* Kant’s basis for respect is seen not as the human power to choose but the human ability to defy natural inclinations and to use their transcendental freedom to obey universal moral reason. As a “secular empiricist,” Berlin cannot accept the Kantian postulate of a transcendental freedom that is to obey universal reason. He does not believe in the existence of transcendental reason, because we do not have “a magical eye, which sees non-empirical universal truths” (Jahanbegloo 1992: 113).

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[23] In contemporary thought serious objections have been raised against this secular ‘foundation’ of the protection of human dignity and the power of choice. The main objection is that it is too anthropocentric because it is based on the condition of rational capacity, thereby ignoring animals. It is also questionable in this respect with regard to human beings whose mental skills are less developed, such as children and the mentally handicapped. In chapter 6.1 we will see that Berlin’s colleague Avishai Margalit develops an alternative that is based on the fact that human beings and animals alike are able to suffer.

To defend the power of choice, Berlin also refers to Kant's anti-paternalist remarks. He finds an ally in Kant with respect to protecting the individual from paternalist governments which, although often well-intended, limit the individual power of choice.[24] Berlin refers to a passage in one of *Kant's Political Writings* in which Kant states that "paternalism is the greatest despotism imaginable."[25] Berlin paraphrases Kant as follows:

> Paternalism is despotic, not because it is more oppressive than naked, brutal unenlightened tyranny, nor merely because it ignores the transcendental reason embodied in me, but because it is an insult to my conception of myself as 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 may fail to recognise, I may doubt, my own claim to be a fully independent human being. (FEL: 157; L: 203)

However benevolent the intentions of governments may be, the power of choice should be respected, even when these decisions turn out to be non-rational or malevolent. In this paraphrase of Kant we see that Berlin downplays the Kantian reference to "transcendental reason" as a justification for protecting the power of choice. We have just seen that Berlin does not believe in this Kantian notion. Instead, Berlin emphasises that for Kant the justification also lies in the capacity of

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[24] Berlin wrote these anti-paternalist sentiments in 1958. The Western world was in the middle of the Cold War. Soviet leaders aimed at establishing a perfect classless society and acted as human engineers whose task it was to mould their citizens into the envisioned perfect shape. Berlin nuanced his anti-paternalism later by also emphasising that negative liberty cannot do without some forms of positive liberty and that therefore a certain paternalism cannot be avoided (see also chapter 1.3 about the value conflict between positive and negative liberty).

[25] Berlin refers here to a passage in *Kant's Political Writings* (1793) "On the Common Saying" that reads as follows: 'A government might be established on the principle of benevolence towards the people, like that of a father towards his children. Under such a paternal government … the subjects, as immature children who cannot distinguish what is truly useful or harmful to themselves, would be obliged to behave purely passively and to rely upon the judgement of the head of state as to how they ought to be happy …. Such a government [would be] the greatest conceivable despotism.'"

human beings to shape life according to their own purposes. This is a justification with which Berlin can surely agree.

Berlin must have sensed that this secular grounding of respect for human dignity and the power of choice is rather weak. It rests on a Kantian maxim that is not even interpreted in its original philosophical setting. To secure respect for human dignity and the power of choice reference to Kant alone is not sufficient. In chapter 6 we will see how Berlin seeks additional philosophical backing for the universality and absoluteness of securing this area of negative liberty.

3.2 Shaping their Own Lives

In Berlin's definition of human nature that I am using in this chapter Berlin also characterises humans as beings who shape their own and others' lives: "…active beings, pursuing ends, shaping their own and others' lives, feeling, reflecting, imagining, creating, in constant interaction and intercommunication with other human beings …" (CC: 133). In other essays, Berlin also speaks of "self-transforming human beings" (FEL: 171; L: 216-17). Both characterisations presuppose that we have no fixed or essential nature and that we are not destined to follow some pre-fixed goal. In Berlin's anthropology we can discern an anti-essentialist approach. Essentialism is the idea that there is a fixed unchangeable nature or essence that all human beings share. An important drawback of essentialism is that it can be used as a normative view as to how humans should behave. For instance, it is the essence or nature of women to care and nurture, raise children, to stay inside their homes and not participate in public life. Essentialism reduces the liberty of human beings considerably as it squeezes groups into straitjackets. Existentialists especially have been aware of that danger and Berlin fully agrees with them (Gray 1995: 171).

Berlin is also aware that his anti-essentialism has a negative side, namely that there is nothing universal that can be said about human nature. The existentialists themselves had also noticed this drawback. The solution that they found to describe human nature uses "existentials" instead of "essences." "Existentials" refer only to the human condition and do not contain any (metaphysical) teleological notions of how human beings should behave, what their place in the scheme of things should be or what roles they should fulfil. An example of such an existential is the statement that human beings are "doomed to choose." Berlin adopts this existentialist solution, but, instead of using the (continental) term "existentials" he prefers to define human beings

through "inescapable characteristics of the human condition" (FEL: 169; L: 214). There is, however, one characteristic for which Berlin reserves the term "essence," namely for the power of choice itself. Especially when he is emotional about the denial of the power of choice, Berlin talks about the essence of human nature that is at stake. The use of the term "essence" with regard to the power of choice is devoid of any prefixed (metaphysical) teleological notions at which that choice should be directed.

For his struggle against relativism this means that Berlin has gained an important strategic tool. This existentialist insight enables Berlin to ground the existence of a basic morality in the human condition, without having the drawbacks of essentialism and (metaphysical) teleology that limits the freedom of individuals or cultures beforehand. In chapter 6.1 we will see further how Berlin uses this strategic tool.

Existence Precedes Essence?

We have seen above that Berlin defines human beings as self-transforming beings. By doing so, Berlin seems to comply with another important principle of the existentialist view, namely that "existence precedes essence." For existentialists, human beings have no predetermined essence. When they are born, they obviously exist but subsequently create themselves through their own actions. There is no human nature fixed in advance of human existence. In his essay "L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme" (1946) Sartre connects this existential structure with his atheist position. If God had created us, our essence would precede our existence, because the idea of what we are, Sartre states, would exist in the mind of God and would predate our existence. Being agnostic, Berlin also holds that there is no God who defines our essence. When Berlin defines human beings as "self-transforming," he follows the existentialist idea that "existence precedes essence."

There is an important difference between Berlin and existentialists. Much more than in the existentialist view of human nature, in Berlin's anthropology a human being is also a social being who is always part of a culture and a social group (see also chapter 4). This means that human beings do not only shape their lives themselves but are also shaped by others. This more social and less individualistic characterisation of human nature leads to the question of what remains of free will which Berlin defended and which we discussed earlier in this

chapter. Does this mean that human beings are socially determined? We will return to that question in chapter 4.

3.3 The Author or Discoverer of Values?

In section 3.1 we saw that Berlin characterises human beings as pursuers of values and ends. But what does Berlin mean precisely by the word "pursuer?" Does he mean that human beings are authors or discoverers of values? Being a discoverer of values reflects a realist ontology and suggests that values exist independent of the human mind, with the consequent belief that these values are absolute, beyond time and place, and can be found in some realm external to the mind. This position avoids human subjectivity and thereby secures the universality and permanence of values. The drawback of the realist position is that it could easily lead to the monist belief that there is only one valid moral framework. Furthermore, it seriously reduces the power of the subject to change the values that he or she finds. Defining human beings as the authors of values reflects a subjectivist ontology in which human beings create their own values. Values proceed from their own culture or personal views. The advantage of this position is that it explains and helps to accept moral diversity. Also, there is a great deal of freedom to adapt values to one's situation. The drawback, however, is that there can be no universality and permanence of values, so the consequence of this subjectivist position is relativism: there is no higher court of appeal other than one's personal view or social practice. Berlin does not want this moral relativism but neither does he want a limitation of human autonomy and moral diversity. In this study we will see that Berlin tries to find a compromise for this dilemma. Before describing how Berlin strikes this balance, I will start with an account of how, according to Berlin, subjectivism entered into the Western way of thinking and humans came to be seen as authors of values.

Kant

Before Kant, the subject was primarily regarded as a discoverer of values. The assumption was that there is a realm, independent of and often also transcendent to the mind, where these values could be found. That realm was believed to be eternal and unchangeable, which meant that the subject had little or no power to change the values that were found.

In Kant Berlin finds the origin of the idea that led to the change in Western thought that values are invented and created by human beings, and not discovered. The roots of this important change should be sought in the Enlightenment stress on autonomy. Kant, according to Berlin, defines autonomy as follows:

> Autonomy means the successful self-detachment from any region in which hostile forces or blind forces, or forces for which I am in any case not myself responsible, such as physical laws or the whim of a tyrant, operate. Autonomy, true freedom consists in issuing orders to myself which I, being free to do as I will, obey. Freedom is obedience to self-imposed injunctions. (FIB: 61)

It is important for Kant that human beings do not obey a certain set of values because these are part of the structure of the universe. That would have negative consequences for human freedom and moral responsibility. The unique human property, i.e. that which "distinguishes him from every other entity in the universe as he knows it, is his self-government, his autonomy" (SR: 236). This autonomy, however, can be seriously diminished by internal (psychological) and external factors (biological, geographical and ecological). For Kant, these internal and external factors belong to the realm of heteronomy and an autonomous person should defy this influence as much as possible.

This change has, according to Berlin, an important consequence. The classical Graeco-Roman tradition and most forms of the Christian and Muslim faiths hold that there is a structure to the world in which humankind has a definite place established by God or nature (SR: 239). In this system everything has its appointed place and everything follows unbreakable laws. Humankind is no exception and has to submit itself to this system. Otherwise humankind would lose its way. This notion of the natural order seriously reduced human autonomy. According to Berlin, it was Kant more than Hume who "cut off the world of nature from the world of goals, principles, values" (SR: 245). Before Hume and Kant, the reason for obeying authority or fighting wars used to be sought in the very nature of things, the objective *rerum natura* (SR: 245). Now the reason must be sought elsewhere. In this way Kant opened the door for more subjectivist positions which were especially embraced by the Romantics.

The Romantic Development towards "the Untrammelled Will"

The Kantian stress on autonomy inspired the Romantics. Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) was, according to Berlin, not only intoxicated by the idea of autonomy but also by the idea of will and liberty (RR: 78). While Berlin appreciated the idea of Kant's will for having liberated humankind from nature, he also held that Kant

> puts us on a very narrow moral road, into too grim, too confining, a Calvinist world, where the only alternatives are either being the playing of nature or following this grim path of Lutheran duty which Kant thought in terms of—a path which maims and destroys, cramps and crimps human nature. If man is to be free he must be free not merely to do his duty, he must be free to choose between either following nature or doing his duty quite freely. He must stand above both duty and nature and be able to choose either. (RR: 81).

According to Berlin, it was Schiller who introduced a crucial note into the history of human thought that values and ends are not discovered but invented:

> ideas, ends, objectives are not to be discovered by intuition, by scientific means, by reading sacred text, by listening to experts or to authoritative persons; that ideals are not to be discovered at all, they are to be invented; not to be found but to be generated, generated as art is generated. (RR: 87)

If values are outside of us (in nature or God) they determine our actions and we are then nothing more than slaves. For Schiller, and the Romantics after him, morality became "something, which is not found but invented; morality is not a set of propositions corresponding to certain facts, which we discover in nature" (FIB: 66).

In their desire to break with nature, the Romantics embraced idealism, the doctrine that (according to Berlin) we can invent our own ideals and ends (RR: 87). The Romantics even saw it as their duty to invent ideas now that human beings had lost their "innocence" and could distinguish between necessity and freedom and between passion and reason (RR: 87).

In Kant's original moral philosophy, autonomous human beings were still discoverers of universal values. By the right use of reason, universal rules could be discovered. To discover what he ought to do, the moral agent listens to his inner voice (FIB: 59). For a rational moral agent, submission to the universal law is a free act. Being ra-

tional, he will recognise the universal rules that are binding on every rational being. Kant believed that the rational agent will voluntarily obey the categorical imperative (*du sollst!*) that he finds in his inner self. At the centre of Kant's teaching is the doctrine that people are endowed with universal reason. This faculty enables "any man, in the moral as well as the theoretical sphere, to arrive at answers valid for all other rational creatures in the same circumstances, wherever and whenever and however they live" (SR: 241). Kant did not consider obedience to this universal reason to be some heteronomous force but a sign of real autonomy, because, in his view, listening to universal reason is in fact listening to one's own deeper voice. Thus, in Kant's view, the universal moral rules still need to be discovered through the right use of reason. In the Romantic view, morality is more akin to artistic creation. Morality is something that is invented, not discovered, made and not found. There is some notion of obedience in the Romantic view, but it is obedience to some inner impulse to realise an ideal or to create a work of art (FIB: 61). All Kant's talk of universality and reason soon disappeared in the background.

Berlin's account of Romanticism also pays a great deal of attention to Johann Gottlieb Fichte's (1762-1814) epistemology and view of the self. Berlin characterises Fichte's theory of knowledge as "a kind of early, but extremely far-reaching, pragmatism" (RR: 89). For Fichte, knowledge is simply an instrument provided by nature for the purpose of an effective life. In Fichte's view: "Things are as they are, not because they are so independent of me, but because I make them so; things depend upon the way in which I treat them, what I need them for" (RR: 89). An example of Fichte's pragmatist and subjectivist epistemology given by Berlin is that "food is not what I hunger for, it is made food by my hunger" (RR: 89). Fichte wants to give full credit to the subject in the epistemological process. For Fichte, Kant's critical philosophy resulted in a subject-object dualism in which the human subject was still limited in its scope. The "thing-in-itself" in Kant's philosophy remained a reality outside us that could determine us. Fichte wanted to achieve harmony in the subject-object dichotomy by insisting that all objects are grounded in human intelligence.

The thought that a thing is only a product of the self could easily lead to solipsism, the view that other people are simply a figment of our imagination. The notion of resistance (*Anstoss*) becomes therefore important in Fichte's theory of knowledge, according to Berlin. We become aware of ourselves and the world that exists and develop our

personalities in the collisions and clashes between the self and the non-self (RR: 94). In this way Fichte, according to Berlin, also dealt with the sceptical problems that David Hume had raised. When Hume looked within himself, he "discovered a great many sensations, emotions, fragments of memory, of hope and fear—all kinds of small psychological units—but he failed to perceive any entity which could justly be called a self" (RR: 93). Hume therefore concluded that

> the self was not a thing, not an object of direct perception, but perhaps simply a name for the concatenation of experiences out of which human personality and human history were formed, simply a kind of string which held together the onions, except that there was no string. (RR: 93).

Fichte solves this problem by asserting that the self emerges in the resistance to the non self.

Like Schiller, Fichte was also a passionate lover of freedom. "At the mere mention of the name of freedom" says Fichte (according to Berlin) "my heart opens and flowers, while at the word necessity it contracts painfully" (RR: 88). In combination with his subjectivist epistemology, this leads to the following view of freedom: "I am only free if I do things which nobody can stop me from doing, and I only do this if it is my inner self which is active, not impinged upon by anything else" (FIB: 66,162). For this paraphrase Berlin uses various elements from Fichte's *Sämtliche Werke* (1846) (FIB: 155,162), such as the notion of "the pure form of the self"[26] that is "absolutely grounded in itself,"[27] that is a "free unencumbered self-activity"[28] and cannot be "limited in his choice [by] other than himself."[29]

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[26] SW: vi, 59 ("Beiträge zur Berichtigiung der Urtheile des Publicums über die französiche Revolution," 1793): "*das Selbst in reinen, ursprünglichen Form* (insofern es nicht durch äussere Dinge vermittelst der Erfahrung geformt und gebilded wird"). (Italics mine).

[27] SW: iv, 24 ("Das System der Sittenlehre"): "Das Wollen, als solches, ist ein erstes, *absolut in sich selbst*, und in nichts ausser ihm, *gegründetes*. " (Italics mine).

[28] SW: vi, 29 ("Zurückforderung der Denkfreiheit von den Fürsten Europens, die sie bisher unterdrückten," 1793): "Unsere einzige Glückseligkeit für diese Erde … ist *freie ungehinderte Selbsthäftigkeit*. " (Italics mine)

[29] SW: vi, 23 ("Zurückforderung"): "Niemand darf seine Wahl, seine Richtung, seine Grenzen bestimmen, als er selbst. "

Before Fichte there was still a "restrained" Romanticism but this changed after him into a "unbridled" Romanticism (RR: 93). This unbridled Romanticism was no longer restrained by the influence of Kant. In this period not only did the nature of artistic productions become wild and unruly, the will as well became more and more unhampered, more untrammeled. For the "untrammelled" will the reason to pursue values is different. Living by specific values is not because they are universal but because I choose them, I make them, they are my own. These values

> express my particular inner nature, the particular vision of the universe that belongs to me; to deny them in the name of something else would be to falsify all I see and feel and know. In short, there is now some sense in which I can be said to create my own values. (SR: 243)

For the Romantics, goals are pursued for their own sake, no matter what the consequences are. All that counts is the motive. It becomes possible to sacrifice oneself to an end that one personally regards as ultimate. No explanation or justification in terms of any all-embracing system wider than oneself is needed.

There is a "sinister side" to this notion of the untrammelled (FIB: 66) or indomitable will (RR: 119). It leads to the idea that views of the universe can be created, exactly like artists create works of art (RR: 119). Attracted to Fichtean ideas, later dictators felt justified in their desire to mould their subjects according to their will. Furthermore, Fichte's ideas of the self turned out to be easy prey for pathological nationalism. In his early works Fichte still identified the self with the individual and characterised the self by "its creative activity, its imposition of forms upon matter, its penetration of other things, its creation of values, its dedication of itself to other values" (RR: 95). In his later works, however, under the influence of Napoleon's invasions and the general rise of nationalism, Fichte started to identify the self with the nation or state. This identification with a super-personal entity is, for Berlin, one of the main ideas behind the pathological forms of nationalism experienced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It not only leads to war but also crushes diversity both internally and externally. This super-personal entity

> becomes a huge intrusive forward-marching will, which imposes its particular personality both upon the outside world and upon its own constituent elements, which might be human beings, who are thereby reduced to the role simply of ingredients of, or parts in, some much

> bigger, much more impressive, much more historically persistent personality. (RR: 95)

In chapter 4.2 we will examine Berlin's views on nationalism further.

In this section we have seen that in contrast to Kant's own thinking, his ideas headed in the dangerous direction of the "indomitable" or "untrammelled" will. According to Berlin, Kant unintentionally opened the door for the Romantics to change our idea of the role of the subject. Kant very much regretted the direction in which his ideas were taken, but the change in the history of thought was made and could not be erased. Like the Romantics, Berlin also welcomed the Kantian insight that the reason for obedience is no longer compliance with some objective *rerum natura.* Ways of life no longer need to be seen as a matter of fate but as one of choice (CTH: 4). Societies are no longer thought to reflect the eternal scheme of things and we have the autonomy and ability to improve life. This is the heritage of the Romantics that Berlin certainly wants to retain, but how can he avoid its sinister side?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Berlin's basic characterisation of human beings is that they are pursuers of ends with the power of choice. This power of choice is that which makes human beings human beings, but it also presents humans with the burden that choices and responsibilities cannot be avoided. We are doomed to choose. There is a tendency to escape that burden by seeking excuses in scientific determinism or in subjection to religious faith. Berlin presupposes the existence of a free will, even though he realises that human beings can be shaped by social, biological and psychological factors. This fact, however, does not completely do away with human liberty. Berlin's main argument in his "free will defence" is that without it human beings cannot be held responsible. Our whole language of moral praise and blame would become obsolete.

It is important for Berlin that the human power of choice be respected. To support that basic moral rule, Berlin, as an historian of ideas, first looks at the teachings of Kant and finds statements that "men should not be treated as means, but as ends in themselves" and that "paternalism is the greatest despotism imaginable." In the history of ideas much lip-service has been paid to these Kantian ideas, but

they have often been detached from their original philosophical context.

For the protection of the power of choice, it is not enough to refer to the existence of an idea in history. Berlin needs firmer ground, something that somehow transcends the contingency of a particular history. A good candidate for that purpose would be to have recourse to a universally understood concept of human nature, but that also leads to the danger of essentialist and teleological views of how human beings ought to behave and thus limits their freedom beforehand. But by referring to characteristics of human beings that do not contain any essentialist and teleological notions about the place and direction of human lives, it is possible to say something about human nature, without pinning human beings down *a priori* to a specific goal.

Berlin characterises human beings as pursuers of ends. Does he mean thereby that we are authors or discovers of values? As a historian of ideas, Berlin described Kant's role in disconnecting human beings from their pre-given and fixed moral structures to give them real autonomy. The consequence of this is that the essence of human beings is no longer fixed and that human beings as "authors of values" can shape their own and other lives. Berlin defines human beings as "self-transforming" creatures. What they cannot transform, however, is the (pre-given) fact that they have to make choices and pursue values and ends. This in fact is a tacit essentialism and teleology in Berlin's thought. Main difference with the metaphysical forms is that the values and ends that have to be pursued are not pre-given but have to be (subjectively) chosen.

More than the existentialists, Berlin is aware that human beings are also social beings whose lives are shaped considerably by their traditions and cultures. This view of human nature has negative consequences for human autonomy. These social bounds are heteronomous forces that Kant had so laboriously removed when liberating human beings from their pre-given structures. In the next chapter we will examine more closely Berlin's view of the social self.

When Berlin characterises human beings as "pursuers" of ends, he cleverly avoids choosing between the human being as an author or as a discoverer of values. If human beings are defined purely as authors, moral diversity can be easily explained and their autonomy is secured —but with negative radical subjectivist and relativist consequences. If Berlin had defined human beings as discoverers, their autonomy would be limited. Also, the danger of monism would increase. He

somehow needs to reduce (radical) subjectivism without presupposing the presence of one pre-given universally valid source of values. We will further see how Berlin deals with this philosophical challenge.

CHAPTER 4

The Need to Belong and to be Recognised

Berlin is usually represented as a twentieth-century defender of liberalism. This could easily lead to the impression that Berlin's view of the self is individualistic. In this chapter, however, we will see that, for Berlin, an autonomous person is also always embedded in a community. This combination leads to questions with regard to Berlin's defence of free will that we have seen in the previous chapter. Are human beings free or socially determined? In this chapter we will also examine Berlin's ideas on nationalism and Zionism, which led to tensions with his value pluralist ideas.

4.1 CORRECTION OF THE LIBERAL VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE

In the introduction we saw that Berlin had Jewish, Russian and British roots. In his essay "The Three Strands of My Life" (1979) he describes the influence of these different cultural backgrounds in his life and philosophy. His Jewish roots especially have made him aware of the human need to belong to a group (PI: 258). Berlin was not a religious believer, but his Jewish roots are so deep and native to him that he cannot "identify and analyse them" (PI: 285).

For Berlin, the relationship with others is "not merely a contingent fact about men" but part "of what we mean by men, a part of the definition of human beings as a species" (L: 293). In this view of human nature Berlin was influenced by Johan Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), who was one of the first thinkers to be explicit about the human need to belong to a group:

> It was Herder, the German philosopher of history, who first drew wide attention to the proposition that *among elementary human needs*—as basic as those for food, shelter, security, procreation, communication—is the need to belong to a particular group, united by some common links—especially language, collective memories, continuous life upon the same soil, to which some added characteristics of which we have heard much in our times—race, blood, religion, a sense of common mission, and the like. (AC: 257; italics mine.)

Herder saw the need to belong as essential. Berlin does not want to go that far, but he does regard it as rather basic (Jahanbegloo 1992: 90). According to Berlin, Herder gave birth to the idea:

> … that men, if they are to exercise their faculties fully, and so develop into all that they can be, *need to belong* to identifiable communal groups, each with its own outlook, style, traditions, historical memories and language. (TCE: 14; italics mine).

Inspired by Herder, Berlin gives four explanations for the human need to belong to a communal group: 1) self-definition or identity formation, 2) self-expression, 3) real understanding and 4) recognition.

The first explanation is self-definition or identity formation. Individuals cannot define themselves apart from their relationship with others. In "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958) Berlin writes: "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" (FEL: 156; L: 202). One cannot define oneself without reference to the group to which the person belongs: "… I am a social being in a deeper sense than that of interaction with others. For am I not what I am to some degree, in virtue of what others think and feel me to be" (FEL: 155; L: 201). For Berlin, the ideas about oneself depend upon interaction with others. A person's moral and social identity is intelligible only in terms of the social network (FEL: 155; L: 201).

The second explanation is self-expression. Communal groups are also important because they enable human beings to become involved in aesthetic and spiritual activity. Berlin is clearly influenced by the Herderian expressivist view that says that human beings manifest themselves in art, literature, religion and philosophy, laws and sciences, play and work (TCE: 14). Herder regards these expressions primarily as forms of communication and not as objects for use or pleasure or instruction in the utilitarian sense (TCE: 14). These expressions show the entire personality of the individual or the group and their view of life. For Herder, they are even "part of the essence of human beings as such" (TCE: 176). Herder pities those who have no group, "because they are exiled or self-exiled, physically or spiritually, and are doomed to sterility" (TCE: 219). We will see later that this idea inspired Berlin's commitment to his Zionism.

The third reason for the need to belong is the psychological and social human need to have intimate communication and to be truly understood. This can achieved only when ways of life are shared:

> When men complain of loneliness, what they mean is that nobody understands what they are saying. To be understood is to share a common past, common feelings and language, common assumptions, the possibility of intimate communication—in short, to share common forms of life. (PI: 258)

True understanding is possible only between people with a common language and background. For Berlin,

> loneliness is not just the absence of others but far more a matter of living among people who do not understand what one is saying; they can truly understand only if they belong to a community where communication is effortless, almost instinctive. (Gardels 1991: 21)

The fourth reason is the need to be recognised either by other groups within a society or by the international community. Recognition in this case means being regarded as full members of society without being ignored as a minority and the right to deviate culturally from the majority culture. For an individual, the recognition that one is a member of a particular group belongs to "some of my personal and permanent characteristics" (FEL: 155; L: 201). When this is denied, it often results in a hankering after status and recognition. This longing can be so intense that unrecognised people are prepared to fight collectively and die for that cause. The need to be recognised also explains why minorities are prepared to give up a considerable part of their negative liberty and to obey despotic leaders who are at least members of their own group or race and not some colonial oppressor (FEL: 155; L: 201). Berlin accuses contemporary liberals of often being blind to the need to belong and to be recognised (FEL: 162; L: 208).

In his view of human nature Berlin adopts the Herderian idea that individuals need to be embedded in a group for a proper formation of their identity. This is not just some accidental self-chosen group but a community with a collective identity that is based on a common history, language and traditions. This idea remained a vital part of this thought during his whole life and made him anti-cosmopolitan. In 1991 Berlin told his interviewer Nathan Gardels, "Like Herder, I regard cosmopolitanism as empty. People can't develop unless they be-

long to a culture. Even if they rebel against it and transform it entirely, they still belong to a stream of tradition" (Gardels 1991: 22).

In this Herderian view of human nature we see that Berlin regards the basic relationship between individuals and their communities to be harmonious. Individuals simply need their communities in order to define and express themselves and to be truly understood and recognised. Central to Berlin's value pluralism, however, is the perennial value conflict between the demands of individuality and the social nature of human beings. We will explore the question of whether Berlin's Herderian view of human nature is wholly consistent with his value pluralism in chapter 4.4.

Berlin's Socialised Version of Kant's Doctrine of Human Freedom

In his famous essay "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958) Berlin admits that a view of human nature that stresses the importance of cultural or group embeddedness can present problems with regard to the Kantian doctrine of human freedom that he also embraces (see chapter 3.1). Human beings need to belong to a communal group for true understanding, self-expression, self-identification and recognition. Kant's free human being, however, needs no public recognition for his inner freedom. For Kant, to feel like somebody or nobody in terms of his or her position and function in a social whole, is "the most heteronomous condition imaginable" (FEL: 156n; L: 202n). There is a conflict between these two views of human nature and the values behind them: belonging to a culture or group and personal autonomy. In his anthropology Berlin uses a "mixture" or, in his own words, "a socialised and empirical version of the Kantian doctrine of human freedom" (FEL: 156n; L: 202n). He seeks to do justice to both social embeddedness and (individual) autonomy. In his essay "Two Concepts of Liberty" Berlin provides some insight as to how he understands this two-pronged concept of human nature. He starts by giving an account of the Kantian notion of the self along the lines we have already seen in chapter 3.1. Human beings want to pursue their own life in accordance with self-determined purposes (FEL: 157;L: 203). Not being free in this Kantian sense is "not being recognised as a self-governing individual human being" (FEL: 157; L: 203). Then Berlin makes a sharp contrast with the social version of the self:

> For what I am is, in large part, determined by what I feel and think; and what I feel and think is determined by the feeling and thought pre-

> vailing 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. (FEL: 157; L: 203)

In this quote, Berlin emphasises the person's social and communal embeddedness. He refers to the conservative thinker Edmund Burke (1729-97) for the idea that we are "an ingredient in a social pattern." The impression could be given that Berlin's thoughts on society are similar to Burke's conservative position, but this is not the case. Berlin does not share Burke's (in his view) organic view of society in which human beings are connected with their cultures "by myriad strands." In this organic view human beings cannot escape the fact that they are made by society (TCE: 172-73; CTH: 226). In Berlin's socialised version of Kant's doctrine of human freedom human beings are not "hopelessly culture-bound" (CTH: 88). The reason why Berlin deviates from this organic view is that it could easily lead to the idea that human beings are fully determined by their societies. He realises that individuals may go very far in identifying themselves with the ends and goals of a community and they can feel deeply embedded in their social practices or traditions, yet individuals are not "trapped" forever by their attachments. Berlin wants to hold on to the idea that human beings are able to transcend their cultures, that they can take a critical view of their cultures and make changes within their societies. History has shown Berlin that there have always been persons who were prepared to develop ideas or life plans "against the current" (the title of one of Berlin's books). For Berlin, change takes place not only as a result of changing material circumstances within the community but also as the result of the implementation of new ideas that can either be internally raised by critical self reflection or provided by outsiders. For Berlin communities are open systems in which intercommunication is possible (CTH: 11).

We see here a second version of Berlin's "free will defence" that is based on the idea that innovation and change within traditions cannot be explained otherwise. (The first version, which we saw in chapter 3.1, is based on the existence of a language of moral praise and blame). It is crucial for Berlin to deny that human beings are completely bound to their culture. Not only would that deny human freedom, it would also, according to Berlin, lead to the relativist position:

> Relativism, in its modern form, tends to spring from the view that men's outlooks are unavoidably determined by forces of which they

> are often unaware—Schopenhauer's irrational cosmic force; Marx's class-bound morality; Freud's unconscious drives; the social anthropologists' panorama of the irreconcilable variety of customs and beliefs conditioned by circumstances largely uncontrolled by men. (CTH: 78)

Berlin connects relativism directly with views of human nature which hold that one's perspective is conditioned by various conscious and unconscious biological, psychological and social drives. This is a position that Berlin seeks to avoid, as it would enable people to use determinism as an excuse for avoiding responsibility for their actions.

An Instrumentalist View of Community?

The appraisal of communal values is, in Berlin's view, based on the the human need to belong to communities in order to build their identities. It could be argued here that Berlin is defending an instrumentalist view of community here: individuals need their communities only as a means for completing their own projects. In such a view communities have no instrinsic value and that could easily justify a parasitical use of communities by the individual.

Is this criticism valid? To answer that, it is first important to see whether Berlin holds a social atomist view of human nature. The reason for asking this question is that an instrumentalist view of community presuppose the social atomist idea that communities are constituted by the relations between individual subjects (Finlayson 2005: 30), denying that communities are broader entities that go beyond the individuals' interests. In my view, Berlin does not hold to a full social atomist view as can be found in much (liberal) political theory. It is true that Berlin defines individual subjects as logically prior to the social unit. He has to do so if he is to avoid the notion of individuals as socially determined, thus leaving inexplicable why some people manage to think and act "against the current". But this does not entail for Berlin that the liberal "exit option" from the community is an easy one. We have seen in the previous section that, in Berlin's view, individuals are connected by myriad strands to their communities and deeply embedded in their social practices and traditions. In Berlin's view of human nature, the need to belong is just one aspect of a more complex relationship between individuals and their communites. There are also roots that are "so deep and native" (PI: 285) that they cannot be identified or analysed as a specific human need. For Berlin,

community values can even inspire human beings to give up (temporarily) their freedom or even sacrifice their lives and that is in clear contrast to the parasitical attitude we witness today. In his work, we can witness a clear intrinsic appreciation of communities and traditions. Berlin regards communal values as ends in themselves that need to be defended against, for instance, the threat of assimilation (see chapter 4.3)

Avoiding Radical Subjectivism

With this "two-pronged" view of human nature (stressing both individuality and belonging) Berlin is able to avoid radical subjectivism, including the danger of moral chaos and egotism that arose with the Romantic definition of human beings as authors of values. Human beings are not individual atoms but members of groups for whom it is hardly impossible to ignore the moral frameworks that surround them. Thus there is not only subjective creation but also copying, adaptation, and learning the rules that are given by one's community. There is an external check provided by one's community.

Does this mean, for Berlin, that human beings are no longer authors of values? No, values are still human creations, but the creation process itself has become less individual and is mediated more by the communities in which human beings live. For most "ordinary" people the values and ends are pre-given and provided by their communities; in that sense they can be called "discoverers." The innovators among them, however, can invent or renew values and ends, and this is often done "against the current." These innovations, however, must in the end be recognised by fellow human beings. If recognition and acceptance does not take place during the lifetime of the innovators, this should at least occur after their death, as in case of the unfortunate Vico (see chapter 5). Without recognition and acceptance, innovations cannot become part of the values and ends of a community.

In this way relativism and subjectivism are reduced considerably but not completely. Berlin's recourse to communal frameworks is still a particularist solution. He thus secures only the possibility of diachronic judgement (within a tradition). In chapter 6 we will see how Berlin also seeks ways to achieve synchronic judgement (between traditions) without betraying his value pluralist commitment to diversity. In chapter 6 we will also see how Berlin justifies a certain

ontological realism in the moral field whilst at the same time maintaining that values are human (social) constructions.

4.2 BERLIN'S IDEAS ON NATIONALISM

Berlin was intrigued by the fact that in the twentieth century nationalism so unexpectedly played a major role. In his essays "The Bent Twig" (CTH: 1972)[30] and "Nationalism, Past Neglect and Present Power" (AC: 1978), and in an interview with Nathan Gardels "Two Concepts of Nationalism" in 1991 (Gardel, 1991) Berlin describes the nineteenth-century tendency to anticipate the decline of this sentiment (by Marx and Durkheim) and how no one predicted the impact of nationalism in the twentieth century.

In "Nationalism, Past Neglect and Present Power" Berlin gives the following four characteristics of nationalism: 1) the belief in the overriding need to belong to a nation; 2) the belief in the organic relationships of all the elements that constitute a nation; 3) the belief in the value of our own nation simply because it is our own; 4) the belief in the supremacy of its claims, when faced by rival contenders for authority or loyalty.

Berlin sees as one of the causes of nationalism wounded pride and the sense of humiliation after invasion or colonisation. He also indicates a more existential reason: in society there can be groups or classes who are in search of a focus for loyalty or self-identification. Forces for cohesion that were present in previous times (tribal, religious, feudal, dynastic or military) were absent in the twentieth century. Therefore, a new ideology, nationalism, had to be created.

In his writings Berlin makes a clear distinction between two types of nationalism: the mild and the pathological forms The mild form of nationalism (also called populism) is, for Berlin, a natural human sentiment that is based on an innocent attachment to family, language, one's own city, country and traditions. In its pathological form nationalism proclaims the supreme value of the nation's own culture, history, race, spirit, institutions, even of its physical attributes. Pathological nationalism requires a specific vision of the human self, a

[30] "The Bent Twig" was published in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. The bent twig is a metaphor that Berlin attributes to the poet Schiller to describe the resistance to the humiliation caused by the French occupation of Germany. People responded by lashing back and by refusing to accept their alleged inferiority.

self that is no longer individual but is identified with the nation. An individual considers himself to be nothing without his *Volk.* According to Berlin, it was especially Fichte who, after the French invasion of Germany adopted the idea that:

> … man is nothing without society, that man is nothing without the group, that the human being hardly exists at all. The individual, he begins to suspect, does not exist, he must vanish. The group—Gattung—alone exists, is alone real. [31] (FIB: 67)

Fichte used the German term *Gattung* which is difficult to translate into English but roughly means "group, community, species, or race." Fichte even went as far as to identify the individual self with the political state:

> The individual is but an element in the State, and, if he cuts himself off from it, is a limb without a body, a meaningless fragment that derives its significance only from its association with—the place that it occupies in—the system, the organism, the whole. (SR: 244)

The language of bodies and limbs refers to an organic way of thinking that was typical for the nineteenth century. Berlin is quite critical with respect to the use of the organic metaphor and regards it as a "fatal analogy between the individual and the nation" (FIB: 70). In his view, organic thinking even leads to the justification of strong leaders who must unify the will of the nation (FIB: 70). In Fichte's work there are several references to the need for an *Oberherr*[32] (leader) who must subject humans to the yoke of the law.[33] In this way Berlin links this pathological form of nationalism with the later developments of National Socialism.

Berlin recognises an important existential aspect in pathological nationalism, namely that people can find meaning and purpose in life through the identification of the individual self with the collective self:

> This is the secular version of the old Hebraic-Christian House of Israel, the mystical community of the faithful who are parts one of an-

[31] Fichte's use of the term *Gattung* can be found in SW: vii, 37-38, *Die Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters*, 1804.

[32] Fichte's use of the term *Oberherr* can be found in SW: iv, 444, *Die Staatslehre, oder über das Verthältniss des Urstaates zum Vernunftreiche, in Vorlesungen*, 1813.

[33] Here Berlin paraphrases Fichte (SW: iv, 436 *Die Staatslehre,* 1813).

> other. Some tended to identify it with a culture, some with a Church, some with a race or nation or class. It is this collective self that generates the form of life lived by individuals, and gives meaning and purpose to all its members; it creates their values and the institutions in which these values are embodied, and is thus the eternal, infinite spirit incarnate, an authority from which there can be no appeal. (SR: 244)

Berlin sees analogies with religious life and nationalism can become a substitute for religion.

Now that Berlin has made this distinction between mild and pathological nationalism, he is ready to justify his Zionist commitments, which in his view are based of course on quite natural and healthy needs and feelings.

4.3 Berlin's Ideas on Zionism

Berlin was not only the father of value pluralism; he was also a committed Zionist. These two roles turn out not to be very compatible, as I will demonstrate in this and the next section. But before showing that, I first want to describe Berlin's ideas on Zionism, his commitment to the case for a Jewish homeland and state.

Berlin's Jewish roots and the terrible fate of the Jewish people in Europe in the twentieth century inspired him in his desire to have a Jewish homeland. Why was it necessary to have a homeland and not simply work for better conditions in the host country? As a secularised Jew, Berlin could not fall back on the Jewish religion to justify his Zionism. As a liberal he also must have had difficulties with the socialist reasons for having a homeland. According to Ze'ev Levy, the socialist motivation was that the Jewish proletariat as a national minority was even more powerless against the bourgeoisie than the indigenous proletariat. In a country of their own they could continue the class war under normal conditions by, for instance, pursuing the Kibbutz ideal (Levy 1997: 782). But Berlin is not a socialist and as a liberal he needs to find his own secular reasons for why a homeland was needed.

Berlin finds inspiration for the justification of his Zionism in the works of Johann Gottfried Herder. The nineteenth-century Zionist Theodore Herzl also referred to Herder's works. Herder had a special fascination for the Jews who, as a *Volk* (people), have been attached to their country of origin for so long and had a historical continuity as a

Volk through their holy literature and laws (Barnard 1965: 62). Herder was a clergyman, knew Hebrew and was generally interested in "the self-expression of national groups before centralisation crushed individuals" (Jahanbegloo 1992: 104). Herder stressed the basic human need to belong to a communal group not only to be properly understood but also to express oneself spiritually and artistically. For minorities this basic human need could lead to the desire to be segregated from instead of assimilating to the dominant culture.

In two essays centred on Zionism especially we can find an important reason for Berlin's secular justification for a Jewish homeland, namely distortion in identity formation. In these essays, written in 1951 and 1968, Berlin is quite negative with regard to not only the requirement of assimilation but also to the tendency towards segregation. (In the 1990s Berlin had become more positive with regard to the requirement of assimilation). The first essay "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation" (POI) was written in 1951, only three years after the founding of the state of Israel. This essay turned out to be rather controversial at that time. The second essay, "Benjamin Disraeli, Karl Marx and the Search for Identity" (AC) was written in 1968 and met less resistance. In both essays Berlin describes the difficulties Jews have in building a healthy identity.

In "Jewish Slavery" Berlin used two metaphors to illustrate the distortion in identity formation. First he compares the Jews in the *diaspora* with "tribe watchers." They are very good at interpreting the society in which they have to live as a minority, but they cannot be very creative in the arts and literature because they are not part of the ruling culture. Berlin is probably not doing much justice here to the philosophical and artistic achievements of many Jews who live *in diaspora.* He ignores particularly the Yiddish cultural developments in the United States. Berlin was probably too much under the spell of the Herderian expressivist view in which minorities are believed to be unable to achieve very much in the way of culture in their guest countries, as they "must spend much preliminary effort and ability on merely adapting themselves to a medium in which their neighbours move naturally and without effort" (POI: 172-73).

The second metaphor Berlin used in "Jewish Slavery" was that of the hunchback. According to Berlin, there are three attitudes a Jew has towards his hump. The first attitude is that of the assimilationists. They ignore the hump and regard it as an optical illusion or an old prejudice. The second attitude is the opposite: the hump is regarded as

a privilege and an honour that sets him apart as a member of a superior group (segregation). Those in the third group are "timid and respectful cripples" wearing voluminous cloaks to conceal their humps. They never mention their humps at all and,

> by inducing others to regard the very use of the term as virtually implying an unworthy discrimination, or at the very best, lack of taste, they could reduce discussion of the topic to manageable and ever-diminishing dimensions, and move among the straight-back with almost no sense of embarrassment, at any rate to themselves. (POI: 175)

In this essay Berlin shows the negative side effects of both assimilation and segregation and, for him, the only way out seems to be Zionism, the return to their own state in which it is possible to build a healthy identity. For using "hunchback" metaphor Berlin was reproached, according to Berlin's biographer, Michael Ignatieff, by respected Jewish colleagues in the early 1950s and felt very embarrassed about it.

In 1968 he picked up the theme of distorted identify formation again, but he was then careful enough not to use the hunchback metaphor[34] and used the less controversial method of describing the lives of two apparently successfully assimilated Jews in "Benjamin Disraeli, Karl Marx and the Search for Identity." Disraeli became Britain's first Jewish Prime Minister. He was also an overdressed dandy, fascinated by aristocracy, and had great fantasies about the British Empire that pleased Queen Victoria. Marx kept his Jewish roots secret, but in his work he was hostile towards Jews, especially those who were involved in capitalist activities. According to Berlin, Marx was a typical example of an assimilated Jew with *Jüdischer Selbsthass*. The identities of both Disraeli and Marx were not properly formed. They both remained outsiders and each in their own way rebelled against the middle class society of their time, of which their fathers were only too anxious to become members.

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[34] Contemporary feminists recognise the hunchback metaphor. Yael Tamir, in *Isaiah Berlin. A Celebration* (1991), sees, in women dressed in executive suits, defects in women's identity because of a distorted assimilation to the male world. According to her, these women "turn against their gender and denounce their femininity" (Margalit 1991: 151).

The Need to Have a Homeland

We are now arriving at a clearer picture of Berlin's Zionist motivation. It is not religious but secular. Unlike the socialist Zionists, Berlin does not refer to materialist reasons or the war between the classes but finds his motivation in the "social uneasiness" of the Jews living as minorities in the *diaspora*. In that condition it is possible for all Jews to form healthy identities and they therefore need to have their own country in which they can feel at home. This was an idea that remained constant throughout Berlin's whole life: "The purpose of Zionism is normalisation; the creation of conditions in which the Jews could live as a nation, like the others" (Jahanbegloo 1992: 86). To his interviewer Steven Lukes, Berlin says at the end of his life:

> It's not, in my view, tolerable morally that a people should be a minority everywhere. Everyone has a right to live in some society in which they needn't constantly worry about what they look like to others, and so be psychically distorted, conditioned to some degree of (Sartrean) *mauvaise foi.* That gives the Jews a right to a country of their own. (Lukes 1998: 109-10)

During and shortly after the Second World War Berlin lobbied extensively for the Zionist case. In 1948, after the erection of the Jewish state, Berlin was asked to serve in an important post in the Weizmann administration. However, he wanted to pursue his work at Oxford and refused, although he was glad that he now at least had the choice and an alternative if life in England became difficult for the Jews. The Jews of the *diaspora* were now "physically as well as morally free" (POI: 183) to leave their host countries or to remain there.

> The creation of the State of Israel has rendered the greatest service that any human institution can perform for individuals—has restored to Jews not merely their personal dignity and status as human beings, but what is vastly more important, their right to choose as individuals how they shall live—the basic freedom of choice, the right to live or perish, go to the good or the bad in one's own way, without which life is a form of slavery, as it has been, indeed, for the Jewish community for almost two thousand years. (POI: 182)

For Berlin, it is important for minorities to have a national base. Minorities are always faced with the dilemma of segregation or assimilation. In case of the Jews, the choice to move or stay was now in their own hands, and this had a positive effect on their dignity and

status. Berlin himself chose to stay in England to pursue his academic career. With this choice Berlin showed, in fact, contra Herder's expressivism that it is also possible to flourish outside one's home country. Later in his life Berlin felt that it was indeed not impossible to lead a good life as a minority, "but nobody should be forced to be a minority. If you don't want to belong to a minority, and you want a normal life, you can fully attain it only in a country whose culture is yours" (Jahanbegloo 1991: 86).

Israel and the Palestinians

In 1953 Berlin described the young state of Israel as a "pressure-cooker" where Jews from many different countries had to assimilate into a common type (POI: 157). Contrary to the traditional "organic" notion that states cannot be made but need "roots, growth and soil" (POI: 149), Berlin was pleasantly surprised that Israel proved the opposite. This new culture was built "in the relative vacuum of Palestine—with a minimum of counter-influence on account of the evident feebleness of the Muslim culture in the corner of the Arab world" (POI: 150) and this made the Israelis a "predominantly Western people" (POI: 159). With regard to Berlin's observations of artistic development, we see that he still follows Herder's expressivist views when he remarks that Israel had at that time (1953) not yet reached the level of the West. "There are on the whole no great thinkers, poets, painters, sculptors, composers," but the quality is improving (POI: 156).

In 1958 Berlin received a letter from one of his friends, the Austrian Baroness Johanna von Reininghaus Lambert (1899-1960), whom he called Hansi. She had fled with her children to the US on the eve of the Second World War. After her 1958 visit to Israel she expressed to Berlin her concern for the Palestinian refugees who, in her view, also had rights. In his reply Berlin began to agree with the Baroness that the Palestinians (or Arabs) are right:

> Of course they [the Arabs/Palestinians] are right in the mind. The Red Indians were right too, and the East Indians … and everyone in history who has ever had to give up something they want to somebody who in their eyes had no right to it and came down like a wolf on the fold without rhyme or reason, a scourge of God not to be endured patiently by men of courage, patriotism, pride. (MS Berlin: 154; fol. 310)

In this conflict, however, the rights of the Arabs/Palestinians clash with the rights of the Israelis. Yet in 1958 Berlin was of the opinion

that in this value conflict the wrong done to the Arabs was smaller than the wrong done to the Jews:

> … the reason for admitting the Jews to Palestine was that their misery has been too long and too great, that the only way to cure people of that particular form of distortion—is by creating the possibility of normal existence for them of normal virtues and vices, of private life, as if it were not too much overlooked by others, instead of dinning into their ears that they must try and behave like other people under their perpetual observation, so that if one of them commits a wrong, the whole lot are punished for it. These harsh words being said, it seemed to me that the wrong done to the Arabs—who had no Palestinian nationalism in 1918, and who had vast tracts of land to expand over, was smaller than the wrong which would have been done to the Jews had they been left to welter. (MS Berlin: 154; fols.305-06)

In this letter Berlin hoped that it was possible to find some "calm utilitarian solution which produces on the whole the best and happiest solution in the end" (fol. 305). But history turned out to be different.

In the interview with Steven Lukes towards the end of his life (published in 1998) Berlin stressed that the tragic nature of this conflict and the equal claims the Arabs and the Jews have. It is a collision between two morally acceptable claims. "Hegel is right in saying that the essence of tragedy is the clash between right and right" (Lukes 1998: 110).

In October 1997, just before his death, Berlin wrote a letter to his Jewish colleague Avishai Margalit, that contained a statement with regard to Israel and the Palestinians. According to Lady Berlin, these were some of his last words. It reads as follows:

> Since both sides begin with a claim of total possession of Palestine as their historical right, and since neither claim can be accepted within the real of realism or without grave injustice, it is plain that compromise, i.e. partition, is the only correct solution, along Oslo lines[35]—for supporting which Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish bigot. Ideally, what we are calling for is a relationship of good neighbours, but given the number of bigoted, terrorist chauvinists on both

[35] Oslo Agreements 1993 and 1995: the mutual recognition of Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), Jericho and Gaza under Palestinian authority and within 5 years to seek agreement on the status of Jerusalem, the borders of the Palestinian state and the refugees.

> sides, this is impracticable. The solution must lie somewhat along the lines of reluctant toleration, for fear of far worse—i.e., a savage war which could inflict irreparable damage on both sides. As for Jerusalem, it must remain the capital of Israel, with the Muslim's holy places being extraterritorial to a Muslim authority, with a guarantee from the United Nations of preserving that position, by force if necessary. (Dworkin 2001: 157-58)

Berlin had hoped for a good relationship between neighbours, but chauvinism on both sides prevented that.

4.4 Identity Formation

In Berlin's view of human nature, especially as expressed before the 1980s we see a close relation between identity and group that is inspired by the ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder. Those who have no group are to be pitied because they are doomed to sterility with respect to creativity and assimilation to the dominant culture leads to a distorted identity.

This close relation between identity and group is challenged today. After the cultural revolution of the 1960s cultural and communal groups are no longer solely regarded as havens of identity but also as sources of oppression and coercion for the individual, especially for women. There may be a common need to belong to groups to form one's identity, but these groups can also be self-chosen, with the option of leaving the group freely without fear of being discriminated against or being persecuted. An increasing number of Western people simply want recognition of their individual identity and not of their group's identity.

Today Herder's expressivist view, including his view of culture is under attack. Liberal cosmopolitans seriously challenge the Herderian argument that it is a distinctive human need to be rooted in a communal group based on ethnic or religious origin. Not only contemporary cosmopolitans but also a considerable number of immigrants show that they can indeed live in several cultural contexts at the same time and that they do not need to be rooted in one particular homogeneous culture. The "simple Herderian picture of the constitution of an individual through his belonging to a homogenous group begins to fall apart" (Waldron 1995: 102).

In this respect, there is also profound criticism from the American political scientist Seyla Benhabib. According to Herder, human beings

need *Bildung*, an education in the values of the collective in order to express themselves truly. According to Benhabib, these Herderian notions presuppose a holistic view of culture that ignores how internally diverse and multilayered cultures really are. When a person searches for an expression of her unique identity, she may well be confronted with conflicting goals within her culture (Benhabib 2002: 52). In her view, the formation and recognition of individual identities can also take place in groups based on certain "topics of conversation," in, for instance, the scientific, artistic or economic field (Benhabib 2002: 33).

Berlin himself does not recognise this holistic fallacy in Herder's thought. Herder made use of organic notions[36] and this could indeed give rise to a holistic interpretation of Herder. Berlin, however, insisted in his work that Herder used the terms "organic" and "organicism" only in a "wholly metaphorical" way and not metaphysically (TCE,: 223-44).[37] He argues that in Herder's view "there are many worlds, some of which overlap" (CTH: 85). Also, Herder did not think that human beings were confined to their cultures. They are able to transcend it: "Both [Vico and Herder] insist on our need and ability to transcend the values of our own culture or nation or class, or those of whatever other windowless boxes some cultural relativists wish to confine us to" (CTH: 85). In Berlin's view, therefore, Herder did not see cultures as windowless boxes and human beings were able to "see beyond the bounds of their own *Kulturkreis*" (CTH: 86).

But despite this defence of Herder, in Berlin's own view inspired by Herder of the formation of identity, we do miss references to the existence of subcultures and competing ways of life that negatively af-

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[36] Organic thinking became popular among the Romantics in reaction to the influence of the mechanical models of the Enlightenment. Organicism is a view of society in which the original unity of the whole is emphasised by pointing to the similarities with horticultural and anthropomorphic organisms. There is a Christian root to organic thinking. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, when dealing with internal conflict in the church, he compares the community of Christ to a body in which each organ has its own task and together all organs forms an inspiring whole. The main reason Romantics adopted the organic view was to guarantee the creative and spiritual integrity of communities and its members over against the more deterministic and atomistic explanations of the Enlightenment thinkers (Klapwijk 1970: 33).

[37] When interpreted metaphysically, a *Volk* or state is regarded as an organism that is ontologically on a higher level than its members. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Barnard 1969: 54).

fect the healthy formation of the self (see also my critique in chapter 1.4). Berlin assumes more homogeneity and harmony than his own value pluralism allows. His belief in the non-harmonious and tragic moral universe gives every reason to stress internal tension. An important reason for this holistic tendency in Berlin's thought should be sought in the justification of his Zionist commitment which is based on Herder's concept of culture.

4.5 Berlin's Later Ideas on Multicultural Society

At the end of Berlin's life, a transformation was taking place in most Western socieities. Due to immigration, individualization and, particularly in Western Europe, secularization, Western societies became increasingly multicultural and pluralistic. After reading Berlin on the need to belong and his objections to assimilation (which were expressed in 1951 and 1968) we would expect that he would favour a politics of multiculturalism that honours the claims of minority cultures and encourages immigrants to maintain their own cultural identity. But the interviews with Nathan Gardels and Steven Lukes in the 1990s show a different Berlin who, in the meantime had become convinced of the need for immigrants to integrate, especially when they come from non-Western cultures. A "sufficient assimilation" of these strangers[38] is, in Berlin's view, required in order "not to create injustice, cruelty and misery" (Lukes 1991: 121).

What could be the cause of this change with regard to the need for assimilation? When reading his last words on his deathbed, and his last interview with Steven Lukes, we notice a certain bitterness with regard to the negative role fanatics on both sides have played in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "Some Jews are bigoted, some Arabs are. It is bigoted to say that the Lord said that you shall have every inch of the soil of Judea and Samaria and no foreigners may be allowed to touch the sacred soil" (Lukes 1998: 115). In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict it became necessary to make trade-offs. "Trade-off means that neither value can be satisfied fully" (Lukes 1998: 113). Extreme nationalists, however, can never be satisfied. They are even willing to commit suicide for their cause. Berlin realises that somehow such fanaticism has to be reduced.

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[38] Berlin uses the word "strangers" here to exclude "the assimilation of people who have lived together for a long time and may have different views," referring probably to the Jews in the *diaspora.* (Lukes 1998: 121)

Berlin also became aware that not only in Israel but also in today's multicultural societies diverse forms of life have to co-exist, often holding competing, antagonistic and irreconcilable conceptions of the good. Berlin realised when he was older that pluralism in Western societies had become more radical and more profound than in the period from the 1950s to 1980s in which he wrote. He adjusted his views. In order to co-exist peacefully societies have profound need of a common culture. "Unless there is a minimum of shared values that can preserve the peace, no decent societies can survive" (Gardel 1991: 22). In the new situation of radical pluralism, therefore social cohesion is a value that cannot be ignored.

The need of a common culture requires a certain assimilation of immigrants. Theocratic aspirations especially should be replaced by submission to the constitution and democratic starting points. Berlin, however, does not demand full assimilation. What he visualises is a society in which there is both cultural variety and political and economic uniformity (Gardel 1991: 22). Cultures should not be "flattened out—*gleichgeschalted*—by some huge, crushing jackboot" (Gardel 1991: 22).

Thus, Berlin does not require uniformity. When he was older he also continued to defend the Herderian insight that people cannot develop unless they belong to a specific culture and warned against the requirement of full assimilation

> where men and women are not products of a culture, where they don't have kith and kin and feel closer to some people than to others, where there is no native language—that would lead to tremendous desiccation of everything that is human. (Gardel 1991: 22)

In this passage Berlin is fighting the "liberal dream of cosmopolitanism" (Gardel 1991: 22). It is the dream of a world without nationalist or religious violence, a world of global citizens who are inspired by international human rights, who form groups based on personal interest instead of religious or ethnic background. For Berlin, this dream is at odds with human nature, including the profound need to belong. He warns liberal cosmopolitans that minorities will also revolt against all-embracing well-meaning benign systems if they are not recognised and feel disadvantaged in a polyethnic context (Gardel 1991: 21-22).

Berlin hoped that his own dream of a society with both political and economic unity and cultural diversity would not turn out to be a utopia as well:

> Yet I do not wish to abandon the belief that a world which is reasonably peaceful coat of many colours, each portion of which develops its own distinct cultural identity and is tolerant of others is not a utopian dream. (Gardel 1991: 21)

For Berlin, the situation is not hopeless because human beings still have a common nature:

> One can exaggerate the absence of common ground. A great many people believe, roughly speaking, the same sort of thing. More people in more countries at more times accept more common values than is often believed. (Lukes 1998: 119)

With regard to non-Western people, Berlin admits that some of their values may be wholly opposed to those of the West "but not all, not all by any means" (Lukes 1998: 120). In the next chapters we will study Berlin's belief in a common human nature more closely both epistemologically and morally.

In the perennial value conflict between "cultural belonging" and "social cohesion," therefore, Berlin takes this middle position. Under the umbrella of shared values, cultural diversity can be allowed and respected. In contemporary terms we could define Berlin's solution as a variant of the "diversity-within-unity" model that is now gaining increasing support within the European Union (see also Amitai Etzioni 2001).

Non-Cosmopolitan Liberalism

Above we have seen that Berlin opposes a liberal cosmopolitanism that seeks to diminish identify formation on ethnic or religious lines in order to prevent ethnic and religious strife. Berlin opposes this liberal cosmopolitanism as it denies the human need to belong and to be recognised. This opposition does not mean that he rejects liberalism itself. On the contrary, without its cosmopolitan tendencies, liberalism is, for Berlin, the political system that is particularly committed to the accommodation of diversity:

> Liberals are committed to creating a society in which as many people as possible can live free lives, lives in which they fulfil as many of

> their potentialities as they can provided that they don't abort those of others. That is exactly what John Stuart Mill said. (Lukes 1998:117)

The provision in this liberal creed that the potentialities of others not be aborted has an important consequence. Fanatics and bigots cannot be allowed to have their own way if they trample on the rights of others (Lukes 1998:113). Berlin realises that a liberal society is not neutral and cannot accommodate all diversity. In times of peace a liberal society may be able to tolerate some fanatics, but when they become too dangerous, the price of liberalism is that these bigots will have to be excluded by, for instance, depriving them of the right to vote or even expelling them (Lukes 1998: 117).

Berlin and John Rawls

How should value conflicts be resolved in a multicultural or pluralist society where there is a variety of competing and conflicting conceptions of the good life held by individuals and groups? Unfortunately, Berlin did not develop a method. He was probably afraid that such a procedure would serve as another monist tool to commensurate values, thereby disrespecting moral and cultural diversity. This gap in political theory was later filled by John Rawls in his *A Theory of Justice* (1971).

When, in his old age Berlin was confronted with Rawls' views, he did not reject the latter's notion of "an overlapping consensus on constitutional essentials" (Lukes 1998: 114). As we have seen above, Berlin had become aware that, due to immigration and secularisation, Western societies had become radically pluralistic. He therefore no longer believed in pure multiculturalism. A society needs a common culture to function properly and decently (Lukes 1998: 114). He did, however, have difficulties with a prefixed "theory of justice" to which one could refer to resolve value conflicts. For Berlin, there are various concepts of justice within and outside society, leading to the inevitable question of "who formulates the rules of justice?"[39] (Lukes 1998: 112-13). As a value pluralist, Berlin realises that in pluralist societies there is conflict not only about incompatible values and ends but also about the highest standards of justice that should be applied to resolve these

[39] This question reminds us of Alasdair MacIntyre's *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (1988). MacIntyre is not a value pluralist and seeks the cause of disagreement in the failure to arrive at a common vision of the good.

conflicts. Unfortunately, as a historian of ideas, Berlin did not regard it as his task to develop a theory or method on how to deal with these double conflicts, apart from the rather meagre suggestions we have met in chapter 1.4.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter we have seen that Berlin holds a liberal view of human nature that is neither individualistic nor atomistic. He takes the human need to belong to a group and to be recognised seriously. This need to belong could be understood as an instrumental, perhaps parasitical view of society, but for Berlin communities also have intrinsic value.

Inspired by Herder, for Berlin the basic relationship between the individual and the community is quite harmonious. Human beings simply need their communities, especially for a proper identity formation. As a value pluralist, however, Berlin cannot but hold a less harmonious picture of communities, pointing at the perennial value conflict between individuality and society. Through the recent work of Seyla Benhabib, we have seen that this Herderian view of communities is indeed too holistic and is difficult to combine with the value pluralist view of communities and traditions that emphasise internal tensions and fragmentation

In this chapter we have seen that for Berlin the human need to belong to a communal group does not mean that human beings are determined by their communities. They can break out of their communal ties. It is important for Berlin to reject social determinism because it denies the possibility that change and innovation can take place in society. Furthermore, human beings could not otherwise be held responsible for their acts if they are conditioned by their social ties and that would lead to moral relativism.

By stressing that human beings belong to communities, Berlin is able to reduce relativism and subjectivism considerably. Communities and traditions offer moral standards and epistemological criteria that most individuals cannot put aside high-handedly. However, Berlin is not able to avoid relativism completely. His solution is, in the end, a particularist one and he still needs to find a way to justify value judgements outside of one's own community (synchronic judgement). In chapter 6 we will see how Berlin seeks a solution for this problem.

In this chapter we have also encountered Berlin's two concepts of nationalism, namely the aggressive (pathological) form and the non-aggressive (mild) form. The latter is based on the human need to be-

long to a group in order to form a healthy identity and to be able to express one's creativity. The pathological form of nationalism is created by the wounds inflicted on a suppressed cultural identity. Berlin uses the healthy non-aggressive form of nationalism to explain his Zionist commitments.

The justification that Berlin gives for his Zionism is largely inspired by Herder. Assimilation into the main culture leads to distorted identities and the Jews in the *diaspora* therefore have the right to live normal lives in their homeland. The Herderian view of identity formation, closely related to group identity, is now under attack in contemporary cosmopolitan and postmodern thought. Close attachment to one's collective identity is seen as the cause of much ethnic and religious strife in this world (see, for instance, Cliteur 2002). Furthermore, according to them, it is not needed for a healthy identity formation. In their view, an increasing number of cosmopolitans and immigrants manage to build their identities through self-chosen groups, detached from their cultural origins without experiencing any distortions whatsoever (see, for instance Waldron 1995).

At the end of his life, faced with a situation of radical pluralism due to immigration from non-Western societies, Berlin became more convinced of the need for assimilation. Cultural belonging is a value that should not be ignored, but a decent society cannot do without the necessary social cohesion and a common culture. Berlin can be regarded as an early follower of the contemporary "diversity-within-unity" model that does not require full assimilation and allows for some cultural diversity as it is recognised that cultural belonging is a distinct human need. However, there are limits to diversity for Berlin. Fanatics who are unable to compromise cannot be given much room within the public and political domain.

In the next chapter we will examine the question if, according to Berlin, people are able to understand one another. If Berlin cannot show that there is a common ground for understanding, it would also become senseless to justify the presence of a basic universal morality that is understandable and applicable to all.

CHAPTER 5

The Ability to Understand One Another

In Berlin's definition of human nature that we have used in chapter 3 the human capacity for communication plays an important role: "… active beings, pursuing ends, shaping their own and others' lives, feeling, reflecting, imagining, creating, in constant interaction and intercommunication with other human beings …" (CC: 133). For Berlin, a creature who "does not think or communicate could not be called a man" (L: 293). In this chapter we will look mainly at the linguistic part of Berlin's definition of human nature, i.e. the capacity of humans to interact and communicate with one another. An important anthropological question in this chapter is whether and how human beings are able to understand one another if they come from very different cultures. To combat possible relativist conclusions that could be drawn from Berlin's incommensurability thesis, it is important for Berlin to answer this question positively.

In this chapter we will explore Berlin's epistemology which takes the ability to understand otherness as a starting point. We will start by giving an overview of how Berlin develops an epistemological approach that respects diversity but does not deny that we share a common human nature.

5.1 BERLIN'S EARLY PHILOSOPHY

After his election as Fellow of All Souls, Oxford (1932) Berlin started to work in general philosophy and contributed to the discussions in the theory of knowledge and theory of meaning. He became part of a group of young philosophers that included Stuart Hampshire (1914), Alfred J. Ayer (1910-89), and John L. Austin (1911-60). The atmosphere was highly anti-metaphysical (PI: 132). The group was, according to Berlin, quite self-centred, did not publish much and functioned in philosophical isolation from other universities (PI: 136, 145). At that time logical positivism (also known as logical empiricism) set the agenda of philosophy, to be followed by discussions on phenomenalism, a philosophical school closely connected with logical positivism.

Logical Positivism

The central interest of the logical positivists was the unity of science and the correct delineation of the scientific method. The logical positivists followed the empiricist tradition by emphasising that knowledge, however diverse, should be analysed in terms of sensation. In addition, the logical positivists relied on symbolic logic and emphasised linguistic problems of meaning (Hanfling 1981: 6, Blackburn 1996: 223). Bernard Williams, one of Berlin's later colleagues at Oxford, wrote an introduction to Berlin's collection of philosophical papers, *Concepts and Categories* (1978). He described this pre-war period as follows:

> [The logical positivists] were concerned with the conditions of sentences having a meaning, and with the connections between meaning and verification, where verification was construed in terms of sense-perception. Positivism both regarded natural science as the paradigm of knowledge, and took a strict empiricist view of science, seeing scientific theory in operationalist terms as a mere compendium and generator of actual and possible observations. (CC: xiv)

The logical positivists were not so much concerned with the truth or falsehood of scientific statements but rather with their meaning. As a test of meaningfulness or significance, they devised the so-called verification principle. There were many disputes on the proper formulation of this principle. G.J. Warnock described the verification principle in his *English Philosophy since 1900* (1958) as follows:

> The meaning of any statement is shown by the way in which it could be verified—it being assumed that verification must always at least terminate in empirical observation, or sense-experience. A special exception was made in favour of such analytic formulae as those of mathematics, which do not require to be empirically verified. (Warnock 1958: 44)

The verification principle has a double root. In the Lockean and Humean view a word has meaning insofar as it stands for a corresponding "idea." The experience of these ideas by the senses produces them in the mind. In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) the young Wittgenstein argued that the meaning of a proposition is the method of its verification. The meaning of "p" is nothing else than the way in which one would come to know "p" (Hanfling 1981: 7, 10). The logical empiricists recognised two kinds of meaningful statements:

empirical statements that are verifiable by observation and analytic statements[40] where truth or falsity can be ascertained by merely reflecting on the meanings of the relevant words. Statements of a metaphysical or theological nature could not be fitted into either class and were therefore considered meaningless. The alleged statements of metaphysicians and theologians were condemned to mere non-significance.

Berlin could not accept the (early Wittgensteinian) assumption that the meaning of statements about reality is given "directly by our procedures for finding out about it" (CC: xiv) and rejected the verification principle. In his essay "Verification" (1938) Berlin's main objection to the verification principle is that it cannot be applied to the whole field of empirical belief and knowledge but only to a limited portion of it (CC: 13). Not only metaphysical or theological statements but also moral and aesthetic judgements had to be regarded as meaningless because such judgements of value cannot be verified solely by empirical observation. Even statements about the past would become questionable. A consequence of this is that Berlin also rejects the strict fact-value (description and evaluation) distinction that the verification principle of the logical positivists required. He does not believe in "the complete gulf between descriptive statements and statements of value" (CC: 166). For Berlin, statements, whether in ordinary use or in natural sciences, could be perfectly meaningful without being strictly verifiable (POI: 2).

Phenomenalism

In the 1930s and 1940s Berlin was also involved in discussions on phenomenalism, a philosophical approach (distinct from phenomenology) that a number of logical positivists (such as Alfred J. Ayer) embraced in some form. The phenomenalists claimed that all human knowledge is confined to the appearances (phenomena) presented to the senses or consciousness. We know nothing of the external things that are supposed to "cause" the phenomena. Berlin himself defines phenomenalism as "the view that the world ultimately consists of sys-

[40] Oswald Hanfling gives an example in his *Logical Positivism* (1981) of an analytic statement: a postman delivers letters. Unlike "The postman is at the door," this requires no empirical observation for its verification but merely knowledge of the meanings of the words. Mathematical statements were also thought to belong to the "analytic class" (Hanfling 1981: 9)

tems of experiences, that there are no non-empirical lumps of stuff behind the scenes" (Quinton 1955: 503). One of the logical consequences that could be drawn from the phenomenalist position is that physical objects have no reality apart from our individual, private perceptual experience of them. This logical conclusion is part of an older philosophical discussion between the so-called realists and idealists. According to Berlin, in this controversy the following question was discussed:

> …. whether human experience was confined to that provided by the senses, as was taught by the British philosophers Berkeley and Hume (and in some of their writings by Mill and Russell) or whether there existed a reality independent of sensible experience. For some philosophers, like Locke and his followers, there was such a reality, although it was not directly accessible to us—a reality which caused the sensible experiences which are all that we can directly know. Other philosophers held that the external world was a material reality which could be perceived directly, or misperceived as the case might be: this was called realism, as opposed to the view that our world was entirely created by human faculties—reason, imagination and the like—which was called idealism, in which I never believed.(POI: 4)

Berlin took the side of the Oxford Realists (Jahanbegloo 1992: 153) and believed that the external world is a material reality that can be perceived directly, whilst the phenomenalists felt closer to the idealist position which regarded the world as created entirely by human faculties. We will see that also in his later value pluralist position, Berlin remains a realist, both ontologically and morally. As an ontological realist he does not think that the world is created purely by the mind of human observers. As a moral realist he regards values, including their diverse and conflictive nature, as real. From a strict logical positivist position, statements about our moral universe cannot be checked by the verification principle and would therefore be rejected as metaphysical speculation. Being an ontological realist does not mean that Berlin believes in a transcendent world, including a Kantian type of transcendent reason that can affect that world. For Berlin there is only an immanent world that can contain unobservable entities of which the strict empiricist method of science is capable of providing only partial or approximate knowledge.

After the war Berlin left the Oxford group in which he enjoyed so much intellectual happiness (PI: 145). Within this group he considered

himself a heretic, "though a friendly one" (POI: 2). He asked himself the question of whether he wished to devote the rest of his life to logical positivism and its criticism:

> I gradually came to the conclusion that I should prefer a field in which one could hope to know more at the end of one's life than when one had begun; and so I left philosophy for the field of the history of ideas, which had for many years been of absorbing interest to me. (CC: xii)

Despite his criticism of logical positivism, the lasting heritage from that Oxford period is that, for Berlin, empirical evidence remains the most plausible criterion of knowledge (POI: 3). In his value pluralist epistemology we will see that this empirical evidence is not confined to the narrow limits of the verification principle but includes human experience in the broad sense, such as feelings of intellectual confusion when obsolete scientific models and methods are used or human suffering due to wrong political models. At the Commemoration of Berlin in the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford, a few months after his death in 1998, his old friend Stuart Hampshire characterised Berlin as follows:

> … a convinced and calm empiricist, who insisted that the stuff of our day-to-day experience, whether in personal experience or in politics, is the true stuff of reality… He took the furniture of the world, both the natural and the social furniture, medium-sized objects on human scale, to be entirely real and to exist more or less as we perceive them. (Lukes 2003: 113)

Berlin and Continental Phenomenology

Berlin's real beginning in the field of the history of ideas started in the 1950s, but prior to that he already had become acquainted with his new field when writing *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* (1939). As a historian of ideas, Berlin could not use a positivist theory that regarded natural science as the paradigm of knowledge. Berlin's main objection is that historical complexity cannot be squeezed into scientific laws. One of the options he could have used was the continental phenomenological tradition. The phenomenologists rejected the methods of natural science as a paradigm for the humanities since it would lead to severe reductionism. Berlin, being brought up in a British empiricist tradition, did not read the works of the French and German phenomenologists. He preferred clarity of thought and language. In Bergson's work, for instance, he found himself "floating about in a

kind of mist" (Jahanbegloo 1992: 153). He felt closer to Anglo-American philosophy and Kant (Jahanbegloo 1992: 49). The same applies to the works of Martin Heidegger: Berlin admitted to Ramin Jahanbegloo that he could not read Heidegger's language (Jahanbegloo 1992: 140) and to Michael Ignatieff he confessed that he could not forget Heidegger's role in Nazi Germany (Ignatieff 1998: 174). Later in his life Berlin was aware that he needed a bridge to the continent and he asked his Canadian friend Charles Taylor to help him. But "[m]y friend Charles Taylor was unable to explain to me what advanced French philosophers wished one to believe or disbelieve; he may be able to bridge it —I cannot. I fear I am too old a dog to learn new tricks" (Jahanbegloo 1992: 49).

Oxford Philosophy or Ordinary Language Philosophy

Berlin was not alone at Oxford in his rejection of logical positivism. Already before the war there was a transition from logical positivism to a linguistically oriented philosophy. Two of his important Oxford colleagues were Gilbert Ryle (1900-76) and John L. Austin (1911-60). The works of the later Wittgenstein influenced them both. According to Berlin, Wittgenstein's *Blue Book* was already circulating in Oxford "in 1937 or so" (PI: 139). Like Wittgenstein, Ryle (*The Concept of Mind*, 1949) thought that many philosophical problems spring from distorted uses of language and that these problems can be solved (or removed) by seeing and employing language properly. It was Ryle who brought the idea of category mistakes back into circulation: "the presentation of facts belonging to one category in the idioms appropriate to another," or in the allocation of "concepts to logical types to which they do not belong" (Warnock 1958: 96). By avoiding category mistakes Ryle believed that antecedent philosophical problems could be solved. In his essays as a historian of ideas Berlin occasionally made use of the idea of category mistakes to explain misunderstandings and abuses in language. Berlin rejected a too rigid division of beliefs into independent spheres. For Berlin, confusion arises if religious and philosophical beliefs are separated too strictly. To clarify his position he gives an example of an "extreme case:"

> One might suppose 2 plus 2 equals 4 was neutral enough. But suppose a religion forbade adding; and going beyond the Biblical veto on "numbering the people," forbade the people even to think of numbers.

> Then 2 plus 2 equals 4 might count as a religious belief—or an anti-religious one. (Quinton 1955: 520)

So, for Berlin, religious beliefs, moral and political attitudes and philosophical opinions do not fall tidily into their own compartments. In the new epistemology Berlin adopted in the 1950s he also regarded languages and cultures as open systems. Cultures are not "windowless boxes" (CTH: 85). Because of intercultural contact there is acculturation: "There are many worlds, some of which overlap" (CTH: 85).

Austin's alternative to logical positivism and phenomenalism was his "ordinary language philosophy." He claimed that the sense-datum language of Berkeley, Locke, Hume, the logical positivists and the phenomenalists is just a sub-language for artificial usage carved out of ordinary language. Many philosophical problems are raised by ambiguities in that language. Austin appealed to common linguistic usage, which is sufficient for most everyday purposes and did not itself tend to mislead. In chapter 3.1 we have seen that Berlin was much inspired by Austin by referring to ordinary language notions of moral responsibility, such as praise and blame, to claim that the human will is free and not determined.

What Ryle and Austin had in common with the later Wittgenstein was that they all regarded philosophy as a kind of therapy. Tracing distortions in the use of language in different contexts and language games can solve philosophical problems. For Berlin, however, this is too limited a task for philosophy:

> Clarification is certainly one of the tasks of philosophy, and perhaps one of its main tasks. But philosophers are also trying to bring to the attention of people the substantive issues that are involved in the raising of the questions they clarify. (Magee 1978: 30)

The epistemology Berlin developed since the 1950s to suit his value pluralist ideas is, as we will see, not devoid of the therapeutic view gleaned from his Oxford and Cambridge colleagues.

5.2 Language and Philosophy

In this section we will examine the influence of Immanuel Kant on Berlin's epistemology and look at how his historical and pluralist understanding of Kant shapes his ideas on what the subject matter of philosophy should be. We will see that for Berlin there is always a *Weltanschauung* that colours our way of thinking.

Immanuel Kant

The philosopher who inspired Berlin most in his new epistemology was Immanuel Kant. He made grateful use of Kant's distinction between the data of experience and the categories in terms of which we perceive the world:

> Kant was the first to draw the crucial distinction between facts—the data of experience as it were, the things, persons, events, qualities, relations, that we observed or inferred or thought about—and the categories in terms of which we sensed and imagined and reflected about them. (CC: 7)

Berlin adopted the Kantian insight that the subject is active in the construction of phenomenal objects. Knowing becomes a kind of making. Kant believed that the *a priori* synthetic categories were universal and necessary. Berlin, however, adapted Kant's epistemology to his pluralist insights:

> Kant, in his doctrine of our knowledge of the external world, taught that the categories through which we saw it were identical for all sentient beings, permanent and unalterable; indeed this is what made our world one, and communication possible. But some of those who thought about history, morals, aesthetics, did see change and difference; what differed was not so much the empirical content of what these successive civilizations saw or heard or thought as the basic patterns in which they perceived them, the models in terms of which they conceived them, the category-spectacles though which they viewed them. (CC: 8)

To do justice to cultural and linguistic diversity, Berlin denies the universal and unalterable status of the categories. In his view, our concepts and categories can develop and change due to internal and external influences. In the construction of phenomenal objects, the subject follows rules that are not necessary. The categories are still *a priori* for Berlin in the sense that they are not given in experience but regulate experience. Berlin compares the categories with spectacles through which we view the world (CC: 8). Because of cultural, religious and linguistic diversity in the world, there are different "category-spectacles" that lead to different conceptions of the world. An example that Berlin gives is that of a religious person:

> The world of a man who believes that God created him for a specific purpose, that he has an immortal soul, that there is an afterlife in which his sins will be visited upon him, is radically different from the world of a man who believes in none of these things; and the reasons for action, the moral codes, the political beliefs, the tastes, the personal relationships of the former will deeply and systematically differ from those of the latter. (CC: 8)

The consequence of giving up the universal and unalterable nature of the *a priori* synthetic categories, however, is the conclusion that knowledge merely belongs to the individual consciousness and that there are no "objective" criteria external to the individual's mind. This leads to subjectivism and relativism. Also, intersubjective communication and mutual understanding will be more difficult to explain. These are the disadvantages that Kant could avoid by presupposing the universality and permanence of our *a priori* synthetic categories. How can Berlin remove these undesired consequences?

Understanding through Permanent and Semi-Permanent Categories

The fact that there are profound differences between cultures and languages does not mean that Berlin does not see any similarities. Berlin's objection to postmodern thinkers such as Lyotard is "that they take the notion of incommensurability far further" than he did (Dworkin 2001: 56) (see also chapter 1.1).

For Berlin, the quality of understanding is dependent on the number of basic categories we share: "The modes of thought of cultures remote from our own are comprehensible to us only to the degree that we share some, at any rate, of their basic categories"(FEL: 99; L: 148). Berlin distinguishes between basic and non basic categories or among permanent, semi-permanent and non-permanent categories (CC: 9). The more basic and permanent the categories are, the less varied and more omnipresent they are. The presence of basic or permanent categories enables intersubjective communication, whilst the non-permanent categories explain the difficulties in mutual understanding. Examples of permanent categories are the three-dimensionality of space and the irreversibility of time. In practically all cultures a person who claims to be in two places at the same time will be considered a liar or mad. Semi-permanent categories can be especially found in the moral, political and social worlds. Examples are: "cause and purpose, good and evil, freedom and slavery, things and persons,

rights, duties, laws, justice, truth, falsehood" (CC: 8). The semi-permanent categories are less stable and universal than the permanent ones (CC: 165). The non-permanent categories are even more transient in history: they belong to a specific culture or time and are therefore more difficult for outsiders to understand.

In his work Berlin also uses the terms "models," "paradigms" and "conceptual structures" as one group, often abbreviated as "concepts" (CC: 167). Like categories, concepts constitute the way we think and respond. Our concepts are shaped by the categories (Berlin does not explain exactly how). Concepts and models are used when the unknown must be explained through the known. They are not very permanent and are replaced when they fail to account properly for experience.

For Berlin, our categories can change, although with regard to the permanent categories this is not very likely. In his essay "From Hope and Fear Set Free" (1964) Berlin gives an example of what would happen if one of them, namely the notion of "the free will," would change. He describes a thought experiment in which a scientific expert shows convincingly that human behaviour is indeed determined (CC: 188). Berlin does not consider such a discovery to be impossible or improbable. He refers to other great transformations and revolutions that have occurred in the sciences "in our day" (CC: 188). But this imaginary breakthrough would differ very much from those scientific revolutions, as it would radically alter our conceptual framework. It would change the entire network of concepts concerned with freedom, choice and responsibility. "Such expressions as 'I should not have done x', 'How could you have chosen x?' and so on, indeed the entire language of criticism and assessment of one's own and other's conduct would undergo a sharp transformation" (CC: 189). Changes in our permanent and semi-permanent categories would cause revolutions in our conceptual framework. That is why they seldom take place.

Berlin does not exclude theoretically the possibility that we cannot understand remote cultures whose fundamental categories differ from ours:

> It is possible, although *ex hypothesi* not easy, to conceive of beings whose fundamental categories of thought or perception radically differ from ours; the greater such differences, the harder it will be for us to communicate with them, or, if the process goes further, to regard them

> as being human or sentient; or, if the process goes far enough, to conceive of them at all. (CC: 135)

> Yet it remains hypothetical: for him, there is "intercommunication between cultures in time and space" (CTH: 11).

Because Berlin is not only influenced by Kant but also by Vico and Herder, in chapter 5.3 we will encounter another strategy according to which Berlin assumes that we can understand cultural "otherness" (trans-historical and cross-cultural understanding), namely through our capacity for empathic or reconstructive imagination.

The Subject Matter of Philosophy

Understanding the categories of other cultures can be difficult, but what is even more complicated is to examine our own categories of thinking. The reason for that is that the objects of our analysis, our concepts and categories, are at the same time the elements that constitute our knowledge. Berlin describes the circularity in epistemology as follows:

> Recognition of the fundamental categories of human experience differ from both the acquisition of empirical information and deductive reasoning; such categories are logically prior to either, and are least subject to change among the elements that constitute our knowledge. Yet they are not unalterable; and we can ask ourselves to what degree this or that change in them would affect our experience. (CC: 135)

The existing empirical or formal methods (logic, mathematics) cannot be of any help in this analysis because they themselves are the subject for examination. If there are no fixed methods for solving problems, for Berlin the question becomes a philosophical matter (CC: 143): the subject matter of philosophy should be our permanent or semi-permanent categories:

> The subject-matter of philosophy is to a large degree not the items of experience, but the ways in which they are viewed, the permanent or semi-permanent categories in terms of which experience is conceived and classified. (CC: 9)

The subject matter of philosophy should also cover the concepts and models that we use, especially in the sciences, the humanities and social and political life. Because concepts (models, paradigms) are more

likely to change, Berlin is particularly interested in them. So the task of philosophy is also:

> … to extricate and bring to light the hidden categories and models in terms of which human beings think, to reveal what is obscure or contradictory in them, what prevents the construction of more adequate ways of organising and describing and explaining experience. (CC: 9-10)

It is a typical philosophical question to ask how categories shape the models and paradigms in terms of which we think and respond (CC: 164). Berlin explains to Brian Magee that, with regard to the use of models, often some kind of analogy is used to explain the unknown through the known (Magee 1978: 39). For instance, in anthropology questions about human nature have often been approached by looking for analogies in zoology in order to distinguish humans from other organisms. Because of the analogous character of models, they can lead to gross distortions in our way of thinking. For instance, in the Middle Ages a hierarchical model was used in which "the eternal order of the universe was conceived as a pyramid with God at the top and the lower orders of creation at the base, in which every creature and inanimate thing has its own specific function, assigned to it by God" (Magee 1978: 39) Berlin is especially keen on locating distorted accounts of humankind as these in turn lead to distorted models in moral and political life, resulting in unnecessary human misery. Needless to say, for Berlin philosophy cannot avoid recommendations of a moral and political nature and therefore cannot be neutral.

How can the adequacy of concepts and models be tested? The main criterion for Berlin is that a model should fit in with the general lines in which we think and communicate (CC: 160). The results can be tested in the following way:

> The test of the adequate workings of the methods, analogies, models which operate in discovering and classifying the behaviour of these empirical data (as natural sciences and common sense do) is ultimately empirical: it is the degree of their success in forming a coherent and enduring conceptual system. (CC: 164)

In his reference to the degree of success we also notice the influence of American pragmatism. (Berlin was probably influenced by the con-

ceptual pragmatism of Clarence I. Lewis.[41]) Models should be replaced when they leave too many aspects of experience unaccounted for (CC: 9, 10). Another criterion for testing the adequacy of moral and political concepts and categories is their effect on human well-being. Berlin's main criterion is whether models increase or decrease human suffering (for instance, enslaving effects in paternalistic models), and this is something that, in his view, can be empirically established.

An important cause of distortion is that models of one sphere are applied in another field. Models that work in one sphere can obscure more than they illuminate. In the case of patriarchal models, the notions of the family nexus are transferred to political life. These models must initially have had validity but in modern societies have turned out to be obsolete and misleading (CC: 158). This type of distortion reminds us of Ryle's theory of category mistakes and the Oxford therapeutic use of philosophy (see chapter 5.1). Berlin wants to prevent wrong but often powerful ideas that have an enslaving effect or add to human suffering from capturing our minds. Such prevention can help to establish a better (but not a perfect) world.

Berlin realises that, due to the circularity of epistemology, we can test only one part in terms of another but not the whole. Berlin advises his readers not to throw out all beliefs at the same time, "even if the ground beneath one of my feet is crumbling, my other foot must rest securely planted, at least for the time being, otherwise there is no possibility of thought or communication" (CC: 114, 115). In the past "major transformations" in our conceptual frameworks have taken place, but they did not change our vocabulary entirely (CC: 188). The changes that have taken place applied only to a specific part of the whole, for instance in natural sciences or psychology or sociology but never to our total way of thinking. The reason for this is that, for Berlin, there is no Archimedean point from which it is possible to survey the whole (CC: 114).

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[41] Lewis 1929. In his analytical criticism of Kant Lewis developed a new epistemological position called conceptual pragmatism. Lewis stressed the variability of our concepts and categories. The criteria of their proper use are in the end pragmatically justified. In his personal impressions of John Austin, Berlin described how in the mid-1930s he accidentally discovered Lewis' work. He considered the pragmatist conversion of the Kantian categories "original and fruitful." Together with Austin , Berlin even held a special class on this book (see PI: 136).

Philosophy, Language and Weltanschauung

Already in 1955 Berlin was aware of the close relationship between one's *Weltanschauung*, beliefs about the structure of the world and the nature of human beings, and the study of language and philosophy. For lack of a proper English word, Berlin and his colleagues in the 1950s used the German term *Weltanschauung* for general beliefs and attitudes towards life (Quinton 1955: 417). Behind our concepts and categories there is always a *Weltanschauung* that colours our way of thinking.

> If you think (like the French Materialists) that men are nothing but material objects in space, determined wholly by fixed natural laws, your notion of value, of, say, what is good or bad, which you may trace entirely to, and even define in terms of, physical appetites of an unavoidable kind, will be very different (and properly so) from those who identify such values with the commandments of a revealed deity, or of one's own immaterial soul: commandments which may be disobeyed; or alternatively which you regard as unalterable in principle by education and environment. (Quinton 1995: 501)

Berlin realises that his own (value pluralist) philosophy is also a *Weltanschauung* that shapes his way of thinking and is not neutral but incompatible with "extreme outlooks such as fascism or communism" (Quinton 1955: 517).

The relationship between *Weltanschauung* and language/philosophy is close. For a profound thinker, it may be possible to unravel these connections but a complete divorce is not possible (Quinton 1955: 502). In Berlin's view, philosophers should therefore not restrict themselves to purely linguistic methods but also critically examine the *Weltanschauung* hidden behind our concepts and categories.

One of the consequences of the inextricable relationship between *Weltanschauung* and philosophy is that alterations in our concepts and categories also affect our *Weltanschauung* (Quinton 1955: 510). And this is exactly what Berlin intended to do when he attacked the ideas of religious and ideological monism and utopianism.

5.3 The Capacity for Empathic Understanding

We have seen in the previous section that, because of Berlin's pluralist interpretation of the Kantian epistemology in which he denies the unalterable status of our concepts and categories, he is faced with the

problem that cognitive structures are no longer innate but culturally construed and therefore no longer shared. Berlin claims that mutual understanding is still possible, as there are permanent and semi-permanent categories that most human beings share. Berlin, however, does not leave us empty-handed when that overlapping turns out to be quite thin. In Berlin's method of historiography we can discern a second approach by which it becomes possible to understand concepts and categories that are foreign to us. From Vico and Herder Berlin adopts the view that human beings are endowed with a capacity for empathic or reconstructive imagination and that it is possible to use that ability actively in historical or anthropological research. This enables communication and understanding, even if only a few categories are shared.

Vico and the Capacity of Fantasia

After a hint by Berlin's Oxford colleague, the historian R.G. Collingwood (1889-1943), Berlin became acquainted with the work of Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), a genius who had not been recognised during his lifetime. Vico was one of the few scholars who had an early awareness of pluralism. As a scholar in the jurisprudence of early eighteenth-century Naples, he studied the society of the Roman Empire closely. He was one of the first thinkers to grasp the concept of culture as a pattern instead of as a single organism; it was a way of life. He noticed profound differences between the society of the Roman Empire and that of eighteenth-century Naples. The historical methods of his time followed the Cartesian paradigm of mathematics and natural science. According to Vico, this method did not do justice to the complexity of historical events. In 1725 Vico wrote his masterpiece, *The New Science*, which was very critical of the Cartesian method. Vico was of the opinion that the Cartesian criterion of clear and distinct ideas could not be applied profitably outside the fields of mathematics and natural science. It was this same problem that Berlin faced in post-war Oxford with its ruling paradigm of logical positivism. Vico found an escape by making another division in knowledge. He distinguished "inside knowledge" (*scienza)* from "outside knowledge" (*coscienza*). We have inside knowledge of the things we, as human beings, make or create ourselves. For instance, history is something that we make ourselves, so we can understand that. It is the knowledge of an insider. In this positive acknowledgement of human abilities, we can find a definite humanist strand in Vico's thought.

With regard to the external world, we have only outside knowledge. This is the knowledge of an observer only. We have not made the world, so for Vico only God can understand the outside world through and through. Vico was influenced in this by Augustine (Jahanbegloo 1992: 80) and probably also by scholastic philosophy. God knows the world because he has made it in ways and for reasons which he alone knows; we cannot know it in that full sense because we have not made it (TCE: 31). The humanist Vico extends this medieval religious notion to human beings who are, in his view, both creators and authors. For human beings it is possible to have knowledge *per caussas* (Vico's spelling that Berlin also adopted). Full knowledge can only be knowledge by knowledge of the causes. According to this principle, we can be said to know a thing fully if, and only if we know why it is as it is, how it came to be, or was made to be, what it is, and not merely that it is what it is and has the attributes it has. (TCE: 31) It is the knowledge why things and events are as they are. Knowledge *per caussas* is, according to Vico, self-knowledge: knowledge of activities of which we, the knowing subjects, are ourselves the authors, endowed with motives, purposes and a continuous social life, which we understand, as it were, from inside (TCE: 41). For Vico, *scienza* (inside knowledge) yields *verum* (truth *a priori*). *Coscienza* (outside knowledge) only leads to *certum (*common knowledge). In the world of things we can see only similarities, conjunctions, etc. and these can be summarised under laws and necessities in a Cartesian and Newtonian system. But "this yields no knowledge why things and events are as they are; for no one but the Creator of this world knows what it is *at* or for" (TCE: 129-30). Vico's criticism of Descartes is that he takes the knowledge of the external world as a paradigm for the study of history. History is a field of study that belongs to the knowledge of the inside world. He therefore rejects the Cartesian preference for mathematics as the paradigm for scientific study. For Vico, mathematics is a typical human creation. Mathematics is clear and distinct to us because we have made it ourselves. For Vico, mathematical knowledge is, in principle, not identical with knowledge of the real world nor even with that of physics, no matter how susceptible to mathematical treatment this science has proven to be (TCE: 34). One of Vico's favourite formulas is: the true (*verum*) and the made (*factum*) are convertible (in Latin: *Verum et factum convertuntur*) (TCE: 35). This means that, contrary to the natural scientists of his time, Vico is uncertain about knowledge of the creation, because it is not created by

humans but by God. However, he is certain (in contrast to Cartesian philosophy) about knowledge of the "humanities."

Vico introduced a new faculty of knowledge "designed" for knowledge of the inside world, namely *fantasia*. By means of this faculty we can enter into the mental life of other cultures in different stages of growth. For Berlin, this is a type of knowledge in addition to the traditional categories of knowledge, i.e. *a priori*/deductive, *a posteriori*/ empirical (TCE: 11). Human beings can enter imaginatively into the outlook and beliefs of a past or strange culture. We can do so because societies are man-made. Cultures are a result of human purposive activity. For Vico, *fantasia* is a superior form of knowledge because it is based on knowledge "from within." It explains why things and events are as they are. *Fantasia* is humankind's unique capacity for imaginative insight and reconstruction. Berlin reconstructs Vico's thoughts on *fantasia* in the following way:

> It is much more like the kind of awareness that is fed and developed by varied activities and experiences of how things look in different situations, how the world appears, through what concepts and categories, to individuals or groups in different social or emotional conditions. It is this kind of knowledge that is spoken of in such terms as plausible or absurd, realistic or idealistic, perceptive or blind; that makes it intelligible to describe the works of historians and social theorists, artists and men of action, not merely as well-informed, or skilful, or lucid, or misled, or ignorant, but also as wise or stupid, interesting or dull, shallow or profound—concepts which cannot be applied to knowledge in either of the two senses discussed in our time by Gilbert Ryle: "knowing that" and "knowing how". (TCE: 131)

With *fantasia* it is even possible to conceive how things look through the eyes of past or foreign cultures that have different concepts and categories than ours.

Berlin regards Vico as the father of the *Verstehen* tradition. According to Berlin, Vico virtually invented the concept of (internal) "understanding"—of what Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and others call *Verstehen* (TCE: 131). Dilthey wanted to separate the *Geisteswissenschaften* from the natural sciences. For the social sciences he needed a method of understanding that emphasised the more interpretative aspects of understanding in addition to the scientific approach that seeks a *Wissen* or *Erklären* that explains behaviour more causally (deterministically). It is not certain whether Dilthey was fa-

miliar with Vico's work. Vico was largely unread in the eighteenth century and in the nineteenth his ideas were picked up by a handful of (continental) Romantic thinkers. In theory, therefore, Dilthey could have been acquainted with Vico.

*Herder and the Capacity of Empathy (*Einfühlen*)*

Vico was not the only Counter-Enlightenment thinker that pointed to the human capacity for imaginative insight and reconstruction. In a slightly different way this was also done by Johan Gottfried Herder (1744-1804). According to Berlin, Herder mentioned Vico for the first time about twenty years after he had formulated his own ideas about history (Jahanbegloo 1992: 88). Herder saw a dimension in human nature on which Vico touches but which Herder expresses better. He saw that human beings not only pursue "utilitarian" types of goals to survive or have pleasure but also wish to express themselves in a more "creative" sense. Vico perceived cultures as "natural forms of self-expression" as well (TCE: 10), but Herder, as a Romantic thinker, emphasised this creative aspect more profoundly:

> The creative activity of men is to be conceived not as the production of objects for use or pleasure or instruction, additions to or improvements on the world of external nature, but as voices speaking, as expressions of individual visions of life. (TCE: 14)

Like Vico, Herder recognized a similar capacity for historical insight and imagination in human nature. He called this epistemological faculty *Einfühlen* (sympathetic empathy*)* or *Hineinfühlen* (which has the connotation of an "active" movement that goes even deeper inside oneself or the other). Through *Hineinfühlen* it is possible to collect and compile historical information. It is a form of (sympathetic) empathy which makes it possible to understand paths to the inner life, the views of the world, aspirations, values and ways of life of individuals, groups or entire civilisations (TCE: 15). In the background of Herder's notion of *Einfühlen* is his view on culture that stresses that each culture has its own centre of gravity and can only be understood from within. Herder's expressivist language theory played a role as well. He emphasised that human spiritual activity is expressed in art, literature, religion, philosophy, laws, science, play and work. These spiritual activities are not just commodities or artefacts but forms of communication with others to express individual views of life. These cannot be understood through rational analysis but only through *Einfühlen.*

5.4 BERLIN'S OWN METHOD OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

Berlin uses Vico's notion of *fantasia* and Herder's *Hineinfühlen* as building blocks for his own method for the history of ideas. In this section we will see that he complements their methods of understanding with a special form of historical hermeneutics to deal with historical interpretation.

History of Ideas

Central to Berlin's historiograpy is the method of the history of ideas. Berlin changed his career after the war and left what was at that time regarded as "proper" Oxford philosophy to become a historian of ideas. The history of ideas is a special branch of the history of philosophy and follows the historical trail of an idea or problem. It is an activity that is done particularly in England. The reason for that must be sought in the intellectual suffocation of the analytic approach on the one hand and its distaste for the (continental) speculative approach on the other hand. The chief inspirer for the history of ideas was A.O. Lovejoy (1873-1962) who wrote his masterpiece *The Great Chain of Being* in 1936. Lovejoy wanted to break down the more encompassing ideas such as Romanticism, Rationalism, Primitivism and Pragmatism into analytically smaller units (unit-ideas) and to trace their evolution over time (King 1983: 10). In the positivist climate of post-war Oxford, the history of ideas did not meet with much respect, yet Berlin made this shift. He wanted to understand the twentieth-century bloodshed and therefore he needed to study the genesis and development of ideas.

The history of ideas has epistemological and ontological consequences that Berlin does not discuss in his work. A historian of ideas has to abstract an idea from the various contexts in which it has been expressed. A choice has to be made between what is essential and what is merely a deviation. How can bias and subjectivity be avoided? The risk of subjectivity increases as the original context in which the idea originally functioned is no longer essential to interpret an idea in its history. We have already encountered an example of this problem in chapter 3.1. In his analysis of the secular justification of respect for human dignity and the power of choice, the original Kantian setting of this idea was no longer relevant. More important for Berlin was how the essence of the Kantian idea was embraced by later generations

(see chapter 3.1). (In chapter 6.1 we will see similar contextual problems with regard to the idea of 'natural law').

It is also problematic that the existence of an essence or reality in an idea must be presumed. This has ontological (realist) consequences on which Berlin hardly reflects. Today's postmodernists challenge the "reality" of a historical idea. The ideas we think we are able to trace backward in time are regarded by them as nothing more than products of our projections into the past (constructions). There may be historical parallels to an idea, but the similarity is not sufficient to establish a direct historical connection. So, according to postmodernists, we impose our present ideas upon history, thereby often distorting the original intent of the author and the context in which the ideas were expressed. According to the postmodern historian Preston King, we may even employ these ideas "as a stalking horse" for our own philosophy (King 1983: 13). This is a danger that Berlin also faced. The contemporary reaction to such postmodern criticism, however, is that historical researchers must assume some continuity, especially with regard to historical ideas. With the postmodern emphasis on discontinuity and change, it becomes virtually impossible to make any statements about the past.

The Process of Understanding and the Influence of Vico and Herder

In his essay "The Concept of Scientific History" (1960) Berlin gives an account of how historiography should be done. It was in that same year that his essay "The Philosophical Ideas of Giambattista Vico" appeared and we can find a great deal of Vico's influence in Berlin's understanding of scientific concepts. Like Vico, Berlin makes a distinction between the world of natural science and the world of the humanities. About the world of natural science, Berlin remarks: "The world of natural science is the world of the external observer noting as carefully and dispassionately as he can the compresence or succession (or lack of it), or the extent of correlation, of empirical characteristics" (CC: 129). For research into human affairs this scientific approach is not the right method. When researching a strange culture, the historian (or anthropologist) does not start from "an ignorance which leaves all doors open" (CC: 129). He or she is not primarily an external observer but an actor because all involved share a human nature:

> I am not primarily an external observer, but myself an actor; I understand other human beings, and what it is to have motives, feelings, or

> follow rules, because I am human myself, and because to be active—that is, to want, intend, make plans, speculate, do, react to others self-consciously, be aware of my situation *vis-à-vis* other conscious beings and the non-human environment. (CC: 129-30)

It is important to note the distinction Berlin makes here between actors and external observers. Berlin, in fact, follows Vico's criticism of Descartes. Contra Descartes, Berlin also feels that human beings are not subjects who are fully detached from their objects. We are actors because we all participate in human life. We share a common human nature: we all make plans, have motives, have feelings, etc. We recognize this in one another even though we need not share the same values and ends.

Because we share a common human nature, it becomes possible to answer why and how questions in historical interpretation. A historian is able to explain the motives and the goals and should not merely describe the succession of events (CC: 137). These questions cannot be answered through the scientific approach. For his own method Berlin adopts Vico's *fantasia* and Herder's *Einfühlen.* The English terms that Berlin uses for this faculty are sympathy and/or empathic (reconstructive) imagination:

> Without a capacity for sympathy and imagination beyond any required by a physicist, there is no vision of either past or present, neither of others nor of ourselves; but where it is wholly lacking, ordinary thinking—as well as historical thinking—cannot function at all. (CC: 136)

This capacity of imagination enables people to understand "otherness" (trans-historical and cross-cultural understanding). For Vico, this capacity is based on the fact that societies are man-made. Cultures and societies are the result of purposive human activity. Berlin adopts this insight as well. He also regards as common to human nature that we are all pursuers of ends. This also means for his own method that we can recognise the purposive activity of others (CTH: 79). In ordinary life all human beings are also faced with similar "problems and perplexities they strive with" (CC: 168) and these can be recognised and understood in other cultures as well. We share problems "which preserve a considerable degree of continuity and similarity from one age and culture to another." This means that we can not only understand their basic categories but also their political and moral concepts (CC: 169).

Closely connected with the faculty of imaginative insight is our ability to distinguish “identity in difference” (CC: 137). This ability is especially useful when a researcher needs to discern patterns in a culture. Berlin defines a (cultural) pattern as “a common style reflected in the thought, the arts, the social institutions, the language, the ways of life and action of an entire society” (TCE: 9). For Berlin, these patterns can be found and recognised once the outlook of the actor and not of the external observer is taken (CC: 132, 137). The faculty of distinguishing “identity in difference” is needed because one and the same outlook can be expressed in diverse manifestations (CC:137). There are, for instance, affinities between the dress of a society and its morals, its system of justice and the character of its poetry, its architecture and its domestic habits, its sciences and its religious symbols (CC: 137). Berlin prefers to approach cultures as patterns. It enables him to grasp regularities in form, style and significance. Yet, unlike laws and models, patterns are not fixed and rigid and allow for diversity and change. Contra Hegel, there is no spirit behind these patterns that cause historical events.

An important presupposition regarding human nature that is connected with the human capacity for empathetic imagination is that humans are seen not as fully culturally determined but as beings who can rise above the bounds of their culture:

> For it is idle to tell men to learn to see other worlds through the eyes of those whom they seek to understand, if they are prevented by the walls of their own culture from doing so. Unless we are able to escape from the ideological prisons of class or nation or doctrine, we shall not be able to avoid seeing alien institutions or customs as either too strange to make any sense to us, or as tissues of error, lying inventions of unscrupulous priests; the doors which, according to Vico, myth and fable and language open to us will remain romantic delusions. (CTH: 86)

If one is not able “to see beyond the bounds of one’s own *Kulturkreis*” (CTH: 86), reconstructive imagination becomes impossible.

In Berlin’s method, there is also “a limit beyond which we can no longer understand what a given creature is at; what kind of rules it follows in its behaviour; what its gestures mean” (CTH: 80). The variety of ends that are open to human pursuit is for Berlin quite extensive but limited. There are values and ends that fall outside the limits of sanity and humanity. “In such situations, where the possibility of com-

munication breaks down, we speak of derangement, of incomplete humanity" (CTH: 80). We will see in chapter 6 (on morality) and chapter 7 (on evil) that Berlin does not want to reach the conclusion of insanity too quickly and wants to keep the possibility of intercommunication open as long as possible. He even thinks it is possible to understand the motivations of the Nazis.

The first critical note that needs to be made here is that in his concept of *Verstehen* Berlin seems to restrict himself to what can be understood only in an intellectual sense. But can we understand the other in an existential or religious sense? Can these experiences really be re-felt ? Can, for instance, an atheist truly understand the religious experience of a believer in God? Can a Christian truly experience Zen Buddhist *sunyata*? The problem with understanding religious and existential experiences is that these feelings and sensations are mediated by the traditions of which a person needs to be part. So the question is whether it is possible to understand in a religious or existential sense when that religion or tradition is not shared (see also Vroom 1992: 270). Berlin restricts himself to understanding in the intellectual sense.

The second critical note is that Berlin restricts his notion of *Verstehen* to the Western tradition. On the basis of Vico, Berlin points to the incompatibility and incommensurability of contemporary Western society with ancient Roman society. Yet the Roman way of life still belongs to the Western cultural heritage and therefore this otherness may be less radical than that of non-Western cultures.

The Process of Interpretation (Berlin's Historical Hermeneutics)

The above does not complete our examination of Berlin's own method of historiography. With the help of Vico and Herder, Berlin has explained that, although human beings live in quite different cultures, it is possible to understand "otherness" through the human faculty of imaginative insight. But this is not enough. Berlin also has to make clear how the interpretative process works. Berlin realises that in a historical account (a reconstruction of what happened) a historian must, on the one hand, exclude facts that are judged to be irrelevant and, on the other, fill gaps in the understanding on inferential or sometimes speculative grounds. How can Berlin establish that such historical interpretations are justified? In this section we will see that Berlin proposes a solution that is independent of the continental tradition of hermeneutical philosophy but deals with the same problems.

How did past historians and philosophers of history in Berlin's time deal with the problem of subjectivism in historical interpretation? The strategy so far had been to regard history as a natural science. History was believed to obey laws and these laws could be systematised into a science (CC: 110). For the positivist philosopher of history and science, Carl G. Hempel (1905-97), for instance, history could be explained by understanding the laws at work. The meaning of an event (the *explanandum*) can be deduced from a general law (the *explanans*) (Munslow 2000: 59). In this positivistic way historians hoped to restore the trustworthiness of their historiography. According to Berlin, these historians were obsessed with the dominant role of factors, such as climate, race, superstructure or the class struggle. Although these factors can contain some illuminating ideas, more often they lead to distortions in historical explanation (CC: 119). Scientific laws may be derived from the similarities we are able to gather about things, facts, or events. The result of this, however, is that the dissimilarities are ignored, which implies that people miss the otherness of the past or foreign cultures.

Berlin's alternative to the positivist method is a hermeneutics derived from "the web of Taine." Hippolyte Adolphe Taine (1828-93) was a French historian and literary and art critic whose work was known among historians in Oxford in the 1950s. He was actually one of the preachers of the necessity of scientific history and intrigued his Oxford colleagues by his study of English history, art and literature from a French perspective (*Notes sur l'Angleterre*, 1871). Despite Taine's positivism, Berlin finds ideas that he can use. In 1880 Taine introduced the metaphor of "a web" for historical interpretation (CC: 122-23). Taine regarded all individual lives in a culture as threads connected by innumerable knots. The crisscrossing of these threads makes a web. It is the historian's task to restore the threads that have vanished. To do this, according to Taine, a historian must make use of various scientific methods such as paleontology and epigraphy. Taine realises that this immense web cannot be grasped clearly in its entirety, so the historian must also make generalisations that should be integrated into the total "web." For these generalisations Taine wanted to make use of general laws that could pass the positivist test of being "objective." But by closely studying Taine's work, Berlin concludes that this was not what Taine was actually doing. He was trying to understand the relation of parts to wholes and to reconstruct a pattern. For Berlin, the "web of Taine" becomes an important tool in avoiding

subjectivism in a historical account. A part must always be related to the whole and vice versa (CC: 122). The "web of Taine" offers a means for checking if a historian is not filling in the gaps in the record through speculation. A proper inference should fit with other segments of the historical record.

Berlin's use of Taine's web plays the same role in interpretation as the hermeneutical circle of Friedrich E.D. Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) also used a hermeneutical circle as a key to unlock the interpretation of a text. A hermeneutical circle is a tool to describe the constant dialogue between preconceived background knowledge of the text as a whole and newly acquired insights into the meaning of the parts (Schweizer 1998: 47).

The positivist strain in the web of Taine was not lost on Berlin. To avoid subjectivism or bias in this hermeneutical process, an account of what happened should, for Berlin, always be considered a hypothesis that must be complemented by empirical evidence of the past to confirm it:

> In the absence of sufficient empirical evidence, such accounts of total social experience may remain no more than historical romances; but unless one is able in the first place to imagine such worlds in concrete detail, there will be little enough that is worth verifying; without the initial intuitive vision of a world about which one wishes to learn, the data remain lifeless, the individuals mere names, at most stylised figures in a procession, a pageant of operatic characters clothed in historical garments, or at best idealised personages in a classical drama. (TCE: 19)

For Berlin, a historical judgement is subjective or biased when the proper methods of weighing evidence have been ignored, facts have been overlooked, suppressed or perverted or canons of interpretation have been arbitrarily altered from case to case. It is not in the context of discovery but in that of justification that Berlin relies on the standards of scientific validation, which includes clarity of language, the rational use of logic and empirical inquiry.

Berlin and Continental Hermeneutics

Berlin was not familiar with the post-war changes in continental hermeneutical insights. One of the innovations Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) brought about in his *Sein und Zeit* (1927) is that interpretation can never be neutral. Heidegger suggests we all possess foresight, a

pre-critical understanding that makes all our acts of interpretation also acts of inquiry about our own existence (Munslow 2000: 118). The whole "being" of the interpreter plays a role, including his or her moods, fears, language and personality (the so-called ontological circle). In line with Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) also criticised the idea of objectivity in interpretation. There is always a "prejudice" present that cannot be removed as bias. Gadamer was profoundly aware of "the historical situation of the interpreter" and stressed that the interpreter can never escape his or her context.

Berlin's belief in and his use of the ability of imaginative reconstruction (*Verstehen)* could give the impression that he assumed naively that different and past cultures could be described in a neutral observational language. Berlin's interpretative approach would, in that case, not really have escaped the modernist and empiricist paradigm. Berlin, however, is too much influenced by a historically interpreted Kant to fall into that trap. He clearly realises that "Every judgement that we formulate, whether in historical thought or ordinary life, involves general ideas and propositions without which there can be no thought or language" (CC: 138). To avoid contamination in the act of observation, the reconstruction must not be done according to one's own concepts and categories but in line with how the "events must have looked to those who participated in or were affected by them" (CC: 135). Self-reflection is necessary to grasp the historian's own starting points and purposes. The difference from post-war continental hermeneutics is that Berlin is more optimistic about the ability and possibility of the interpreter to detach him- or herself from his or her own context. The world of the interpreter, including his or her moods and fears, does not play a role in Berlin's hermeneutics. Berlin admits that detachment from one's context will not be easy, but with the help of philosophy it is in principle possible to be critical of one's own concepts and categories. In contrast, Heidegger and Gadamer were convinced that this escape from one's context and horizon of understanding is impossible.

Berlin and Critical Hermeneutics

One of the consequences of the lack of contact with continental hermeneutics is that Berlin did not use the insights of post-war critical hermeneutical thinkers, who—influenced by Neo-Marxist philosophy —point to the material interests and desire for power that can also

play a role in the horizon of the interpreter. These critical thinkers therefore insist on a hermeneutics of suspicion.

Despite this lack of contact with critical hermeneutics, Berlin's historical interpretations cannot be called naive. Through his study of Marx just before the war, Berlin gained deep insight into historical materialism. In *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* (1939) Berlin describes Marx's view that:

> [the ruling class] whether consciously or not, cannot help seeking to justify their own parasitic existence as being natural and desirable. In the course of this, they generate ideas, values, laws, habits of life, institutions (a complex which Marx sometimes call "ideology"), the whole purpose of which is to prop up, explain away, defend their own privileged, unnatural, and therefore unjustified, status and power. (MARX: 101)

Within Berlin's own epistemology it is also possible that such distortions occur due to material interests and power abuse of the ruling class. Berlin agrees with Marx that, if people are to liberate themselves, they must be taught to see through the myths they are told. What Berlin rejects is the deterministic framework in which historical materialism resides. Marx himself was, according to Berlin, not very clear in his own concept of human freedom. On the one hand, human beings are free in the sense that they can realise their selves and achieve subjugation of the world through labour (MARX: 93); on the other hand, their actions and choices follow laws and are determined by their material situation (MARX: 108). It therefore remains unclear as to whether human choices can affect the course of events and whether humans can develop freely (MARX: 102-03). Due to this obscurity in Marx's thought, many of his successors adopted a "rigorously deterministic interpretation of Marx's conception of history and the laws that determine it, with 'iron necessity''' (MARX: 103). This leads, according to Berlin, to a gross inconsistency in Marxist thought with regard to the power of human beings to liberate themselves:

> It is one thing to say that unless men understand the laws that govern their lives they will fall foul of them and remain victims of forces they do not understand; and another to say that everything that they are and do is subject to these laws, and that freedom is merely the perception of their necessity and itself a factor in the unalterable process in which choice, whether individual or social, is subject to causes that fully de-

> termine it, and is, in principle, wholly predictable by a sufficiently informed external observer. (MARX: 104)

According to Berlin, “Marx’s own utterances can be quoted in support of either of these alternatives” (MARX: 104). Berlin himself, as we have seen, prefers to speak of concepts and categories instead of laws that influence but do not determine our way of thinking and acting.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter we have looked at the intellectual journey Berlin made, beginning in the 1930s at his chambers at All Souls College in Oxford where he, as the first Jew to be admitted as a Fellow, criticised logical positivism and phenomenalism and became intrigued by the works of Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophy. The journey went on right through the atrocities of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union that made him decide to leave the typical Oxford philosophy of his time to become a historian of ideas. Berlin believed in the power of ideas in the positive and negative sense. He witnessed the devastating effects of Nazi and Soviet ideas but believed that wrong ideas can be altered in a direction that reduces human suffering. With the help of Kant and Counter-Enlightenment thinkers such as Vico and Herder, Berlin developed his own epistemology and method of history of ideas, in relative isolation from continental philosophy and hermeneutics.

In this chapter we have seen that Berlin’s epistemology was inspired by a historically understood Kant. The most important philosophical obstacle that Berlin had to remove was conceptual relativism. Berlin was confronted with this problem when he rejected the universality and eternity of our *a priori* categories in order to do justice to cultural diversity. He was able to reduce conceptual relativism by distinguishing permanent and semi-permanent categories that are not very likely to change. In addition, he also makes use of the insights of Vico and Herder, for whom it is always possible to understand other cultures. Cultures are man-made and we can recognise the purposive activity of others not only because we share a basic common human nature but also because we are endowed with the faculty of imaginative insight.

The incommensurability of value systems as Berlin conceived it is quite distinct from the idea of the incommensurability of cultures (i.e. paradigms or language games) as attributed (rightly or wrongly) to Thomas Kuhn and defended by postmodernists such as Lyotard. Cul-

tures are not "impenetrable bubbles" (CTH: 11). Intercommunication between cultures in time and space is possible. We can (cognitively) imagine how it is "to live in the light of values widely different from [our] own," even if we find these values (morally) unacceptable (CTH: 10). What acts as a bridge in this intercommunication is the common humanity we share. When values and ends fall outside the human horizon, there are real barriers, in Berlin's view, to conceiving what it would be like to pursue such a life. In the next chapters we will see what falls outside (but also inside) this common humanity for Berlin.

The criticism from conventionalist and postmodernist perspectives on interpretative approaches that are based on the pre-Gadamer *Verstehen* tradition (such as Berlin's) has been that they are too optimistic about both the possibility of excluding the active role of the observer and arriving at a neutral description of social or historical reality. This critique, however, does not apply fully to Berlin as he is not only influenced by the early *Verstehen* tradition but also by a historically interpreted Kant. Berlin is therefore aware one is always influenced by one's own concepts, categories and *Weltanschauung*. Nonetheless, unlike Gadamer and Heidegger, Berlin is still optimistic that the interpreter can escape his or her context. Understanding remains an intellectual process for Berlin: he ignores the problem of understanding feelings of a religious or existential nature. Also, he lacks the Heideggerian insight that in the process of interpretation the whole being of a person, including his or her moods and fears, comes into play.

By defending the ability of humans to understand one another, Berlin makes the consequences of his belief in a non-harmonious moral universe less dramatic. We saw earlier that Berlin combines this incommensurable and tragic moral universe with a positive view of human beings who have the ability to resolve their value conflicts in a decent, rational and virtuous way. In this chapter we have seen that in addition to this optimistic view, human beings are also able to understand the cultural and moral differences between them. But is this really the case?

The criticism that could be raised is that Berlin's concept of *Verstehen* restricts itself to understanding in the intellectual sense and does not apply to the existential or religious senses. Furthermore, Berlin's account of imaginative insight is embedded in a Western history of ideas. Although the cultures of the Hebrew prophets, Plato, Aristotle or Machiavelli were quite different from ours, we share a

common history with them, including a history of how to interpret these remote traditions. We therefore share a common world with them. The impression could be given that through imaginative insight we can also understand non-Western cultures, because we all share a common humanity as pursuers of values. The basic assumptions of non-Western cultures could be entirely different. For instance, for Buddhists the root of all suffering starts with the pursuit of values and ends, whilst for Berlin this is a central and unquestionable assumption in his view of a common human nature. Furthermore, there are Islamist groups who despise Western individualism and tolerance of pluralism so deeply that their way of communication is no longer dialogue but terrorism. The extent of imaginative insight to be able to bridge the gap between these two worlds could therefore be doubted.

But even if there are profound differences between cultures, Berlin does not regard them as closed entities. This means that there can always be exchanges of views. At least some basic categories are shared and these serve as starting points for mutual understanding. With respect to the terrorist threat of our time, if we can put our feelings of horror and moral outrage aside, we can even discern behind terrorist acts the final goal of an independent Islamic state and behind that end the utopian dream of a great Islamic world community (*umma*) living by the *shari'a*. The falseness of this concept and category of thought can, according to Berlin's views, be communicated and changed.

Thus Berlin believes in the human ability to understand otherness. This brings us to the question whether human beings also share a basic morality. This question will be addressed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6

Endowed With a Basic Morality

Now that we have seen how Berlin dealt with conceptual relativism (chapter 5) and showed that we can, in principle, understand one another and have imaginative insight into "otherness" (trans-historical and cross-cultural understanding), we are still confronted with the question of how Berlin solved the problem of moral relativism. As a value pluralist, Berlin was aware of the cultural diversity of our world and consequently of the existence of different value systems. If he followed the Romantic line of Herder completely, this would mean that Berlin had to accept that moral systems can be judged only from within, in terms of their own scale of norms and values. The consequence of this is that it would become impossible to condemn cultural groups outside of one's own, such as a Nazi who justifies his personal contribution to the genocide of the Jews on the grounds that he was simply obeying orders during the Hitler regime. On the other hand, if Berlin followed the Enlightenment, he had to presuppose a universalist normative value system that overrides all cultures. Such a value system would be monist in nature and consequently would not do any justice to the plurality of the world. Berlin does not want his value pluralism to end in relativism, the view that "the Nazis believe in concentration camps and we don't, and there is no more to say" (Jahanbegloo 1992: 107). He looked for a position between both extremes of universalism and relativism.

Berlin must somehow "justify" his claim that human beings share basic moral categories and that these basic moral categories have an objective nature. The traditional religious strategies of grounding morality are blocked for Berlin. Being an agnostic, brought up in the empiricist tradition, he cannot refer to a holy book. With his Jewish background, he could have referred to the book of Genesis, to the Seven Laws of Noah as applying to the whole of humankind. As an agnostic, however, he needs a secular justification.

6.1 A COMMON HUMAN NATURE

A very good candidate for grounding a basic morality has always been the idea of a common human nature which requires basic rules. Berlin is aware of the essentialist and teleological dangers connected with

this form of justification. It could easily degenerate into (metaphysical) specific teleological views on how men and women ought to behave and what goals they should seek. In chapter 3.2 we have already seen that these drawbacks can be avoided when characteristics of the human condition are taken as a starting point.

Natural Law

Knowledge of the terrible events of the Second World War could easily justify the belief that human beings have no such thing as a basic morality. They are capable of performing the most unspeakable acts. However, this is not Berlin's reaction to Auschwitz. Instead, he notices a kind of return to the ancient notion of natural law after such a serious flouting of the basic rules of Western society (CTH: 204).[42] For the Stoics and for Thomas Aquinas there were certain principles of true morality or justice that were discoverable through human reason. For Thomas, these principles could be discovered without the aid of revelation, even though they had a divine origin (Hart 1994: 156). In its secular variant, the notion of natural law expresses only the idea that there are basic moral laws that can be grasped by understanding the nature of human beings and the basic ends that humans naturally seek. It is based on the idea that all human beings want to continue existing and want at least a safe environment in which to nurture their children. Self-interest needs to be constrained, otherwise life becomes short, lonely, nasty and brutish. The natural law tradition inspired later ethical naturalists such as Thomas Hobbes and David Hume and a whole tradition of (British) moral philosophers after them. Also for Berlin, there are "if not universal values, at any rate a minimum without which societies could scarcely survive" (CTH: 18).

An important element within the natural law tradition is the distinction between natural law and man-made laws. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, did not consider man-made laws to be valid if they conflicted with natural law: "*Lex iniusta non est lex*" (Hart 1994: 156).

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[42] As a historian of ideas, Berlin traces the idea of natural law back to the Stoics and early Christianity. The context and setting in which this idea rests is each time different, and there may also be profound differences in time in how natural law is understood (for instance between Thomas Aquinas and Thomas Hobbes). Yet there is for Berlin 'an essence' in this idea that continues in history. (For the method and critique of the history of ideas see chapter 5.4).

Also for Berlin, there are absolute barriers "irrespective of the laws" and "even if they are made legal by the sovereign" (FEL: 166; L: 211). Examples that Berlin gives are:

> … when a man is declared guilty without trial, or punished under a retroactive law; when children are ordered to denounce their parents, friends to betray one another, soldiers to use methods of barbarism; when men are tortured or murdered, or minorities are massacred because they irritate a majority or a tyrant. (FEL: 166; L: 211)

The breaking of these rules leads to horrific acts. In the history of ideas the natural law tradition has served as a standard against unjust man-made laws. Berlin interprets the natural law tradition in a secular way. Its source is not divine but historical and human, the result of generations of human beings who sought to deal with their vulnerability:

> We lean on the fact that the laws and principles to which we appeal, when we make moral and political decisions of a fundamental kind, have, unlike legal enactments, been accepted by the majority of men, during, at any rate, most of recorded history; we regard them as incapable of being abrogated. (CTH: 204)

Later in this chapter we will see that in the course of history this idea of natural law has become part of the *philosophia perennis* that determines (Western) basic language and thought.

A Negative Justification Strategy

With the help of the natural law tradition, Berlin shows that the human condition is vulnerable and therefore in need of basic laws. In this way Berlin seeks a foundation for them in a common human nature. Michael Ignatieff, Berlin's biographer, notes in his essay "Understanding Fascism" (1991) that Berlin defines our common human nature in negative terms:

> …in terms of those derogations of human dignity and human personhood that all can agree are unacceptable. Thus in place of an optimistic Enlightenment view that all men share the attributes of reason, we have instead a pessimistic view that what men share is their capacity to suffer (Ignatieff 1991: 144)

What human beings share is their capacity to suffer. This grounding of a basic morality is called a negative strategy because it is devoid of

any positive essentialist or teleological claims that all human beings are supposed to share.

A negative justification strategy is also applied in *The Decent Society* (1996), the bestseller by Berlin's Israeli friend and colleague Avishai Margalit. To justify the requirement of non-humiliation and respect for human dignity, Margalit first tried a "positive" justification strategy that refers to specific traits that all human beings share. From a religious perspective, such a justification could, for instance, be given on the basis of the belief that all human beings are created by God and therefore have dignity. A similar kind of justification is also possible from a humanistic or Kantian perspective. Unlike animals, human beings are rational, have the capacity to be moral agents, are able to determine ends and give value to these ends, are able to transcend natural causality, etc. But Margalit realises that both the religious and humanistic variants of this positive justification strategy encounter serious objections. The most important is they are anthropomorphic. Animals are also created by God and can have greater achievements and abilities than human beings in other areas. Furthermore, within humanity there are also criminals or handicapped people who do not fully possess the Kantian characteristics. Does that mean that we should not pay respect to them? To avoid all these objections, Margalit opts for a "negative" justification to secure respect for human dignity and non-humiliation. This is based on the bare fact that human beings can experience pain and suffering, not only physically (like animals) but also mentally and/or psychologically, especially when they are humiliated. Margalit regards cruelty as the ultimate evil (Margalit 1996: 85).

According to Ignatieff, Berlin also used this negative justification strategy, a strategy that can also be found in today's pragmatist and postmodernist positions, as in the works of Richard Rorty. The great advantage of the "foundation" is that it is devoid of any positive guidelines as to how people should behave and therefore respects diversity.

The Natural and Conventional Levels

From the distinction between natural law and man-made law it is a small step to differentiate between basic morality at the natural level and morality at the conventional level as well. In this distinction Berlin is much influenced by his Oxford friend and colleague Stuart Hampshire (1914-2004). Hampshire used the so-called "two layer ac-

count of moral requirements" which distinguishes between universal, species-wide requirements derived from basic human necessities (such as the nurture of children) and moral requirements to support a specific way of life (Hampshire 1983: 143). One of the advantages of this two-layer account is that, at the natural level, it gives outsiders ammunition to criticise "man-made" laws and traditions that do not meet basic human needs, whilst at the conventional level it allows for moral diversity. For Berlin,

> … there are certain minimum conditions required if social life is to be tolerable at all; but once this minimum is achieved there are various directions in which societies may pursue their own ways of life, ways that may well be unique to them, their times and their places. (Berlin 1983: 390)

There are certain things which all human beings require as such "not because they are Frenchmen, Germans or medieval scholars, but because they lead human lives as men and women" (Jahanbegloo 1992: 39). In the end, culture itself is not the principle source of the validity of a morality. There are a limited number of basic rules with a universal application.

With this distinction between basic moral requirements and a morality to support a specific way of life, Berlin has found a way to assess cultures not only in a diachronic way (in terms of the standards given by a particular culture itself) but also in a synchronic way (in terms of competing cultures). He does not specify exactly what belongs to either category or to the periphery.

Ontological Consequences

The basic natural human needs that underlie natural law give Berlin the basis he seeks for a (limited) realist ontology. The natural law tradition itself is manmade, but the values it seeks to protect are 'real'. They are part of nature, in a sense pre-given by nature and independent of human construction. It is important to note that Berlin's limited realism does not entail the consequent step, namely the metaphysical belief in a heaven or realm where these values can be found and secured by God. Only their pre-givenness by nature secures the absoluteness and universality of the most basic values. With regard to values that are culture-bound, Berlin holds on to a subjectivist ontology that, due to its constructivist assumptions, is better able to explain cultural and moral diversity in the world.

Thus with regard to the majority of our values, Berlin defends a subjectivist and constructivist ontology. What still remains unexplained in Berlin's value pluralist theory is that in moral conflicts values have an independent moral force and intrinsic worth (FEL: 167-68; L: 213). In certain moral dilemmas the pull of values on us can be so intense that we can be torn apart. The pain that results through giving up a cherished value is real. It is something that human beings often wish to avoid but cannot always do so. But when the majority of our values are, strictly speaking, human creations, it means that we can also decide against certain values in order to avoid painful moral dilemmas. In a (radical) subjectivist ontology value conflicts in fact become inconceivable. So Berlin must defend a more moderate form of subjectivism. In chapter 4.1 we saw the important role he ascribes to communities in order to avoid radical subjectivism. In chapter 6.2 we will see that this is supplemented by his belief in the existence of the *philosopha perennis* in Western thought.

Objections

Against Berlin's justification strategy for grounding a basic morality by reference to the vulnerable human condition and the natural law tradition, more objections could be raised.

From a conventionalist perspective, which usually holds to a subjective ontology, it could be argued that the morality at the natural level that Berlin considers to be real is just as much a construction of the human mind. In particular, it is a construction of the Western basic morality. In Western thought the common desire to live and to raise children in a safe environment is presumed. But do the acts of the suicide bombers (among them even pregnant terrorists) not prove the opposite? By showing themselves not to be afraid of death, these terrorists even claim moral superiority above the Western fear of death. Against this argument it could be said these terrorists are "victims" of clever brainwashing techniques and are therefore in a sense "mad." Yet, this does not explain the admiration these acts of "martyrs" meet in the Muslim world, including the relatively weak protests against these forms of random killing.

The second objection that could be raised is that the principles Berlin formulates against moral relativism are too formal and non-substantial for practical use. There may be universal principles against, for instance, wanton killing, but what counts as "wanton" and what justifies killing (abortion, capital punishment, terrorist prevention) are

subject to major differences of opinion, even within the Western context. This problem is increased by the fact that it remains unclear as to what the boundaries are with regard to the natural and conventional levels. There are many cultural interpretations as to where these limits should be. To make it even worse, some cultures do not make the distinction between the natural and conventional levels, and this brings us to the next objection.

The third objection that could be raised against Berlin's justifycation strategy is that it is still based on a form of foundationalism, a remnant of the modernist project. This objection requires further explanation. A foundationalist seeks incontestable certainty by building knowledge on a sure foundation of unquestioned, universal and context-free beliefs or principles. From postmodern and conventionalist perspectives, serious objections have been made against any effort to seek "the" foundation of morality which transcends all particular traditions. The reason is that these so-called context-free foundations always appear to be philosophical abstractions or constructs arising from one particular tradition, usually the Western (academic) context, which is imposed on other cultures and therefore does not respect diversity. Good candidates for serving as a foundation have always been essentialist and teleological views of human nature or a Kantian inspired belief in the existence of transcendental reason or a deeper structure of moral reasoning that is believed to be present in all people. If we look at Berlin's grounding of a basic morality, it is indeed based on a view of a common human nature. But we have just seen that it is not an account that defines our common human nature in positive attributes or what is conducive for the good life but in negative terms, the human ability to suffer. In this way Berlin still respects cultural diversity. Yet Berlin is still not completely clear of the charge of foundationalism. There is still a philosophical construct or abstraction that Berlin holds to be valid for everyone, namely the ability to distinguish between basic morality and morality to support a way of life. From the conventionalist and postmodern perspectives, the latter of which is combined with a view of human nature that is (radically) contextual, it could be argued that such a claim cannot be made. The categories in language and thought containing this distinction in morality may be totally absent. For instance, in the Islamic *shari'a* or the orthodox Jewish law religious requirements and basic morality are wholly intermingled and cannot be properly separated from each other. The consequence of rejecting this distinction in morality is moral

relativism. Without the distinction between the natural and conventional levels, it becomes impossible from an outsider's position to judge whether a certain convention is unjust and wrong. Berlin therefore holds on to the idea that human beings can take this kind of meta-position.

6.2 THE CRYSTALLISATION PROCESS

For Berlin, basic human morality should not be sought in a transcendent world or in "some objective heaven" (FEL: 166; L: 211). Apart from the basic natural human needs, the basic human morality can also be found in our common history and in our language and thought. In history a kind of "crystallisation process" takes place as a result of the accumulated experience of generations that seek ways to deal with their vulnerability. We "translate" our basic needs into language and we devise principles, rules and moral categories to protect both our basic needs and more positive goals. In due time we consider our basic rules to be universal and unalterable, because in most of recorded history the majority of people have accepted them (CTH: 204). The idea of the existence of natural law and the (Kantian) idea of human dignity (see chapter 3.1) are examples of that.

Through this "crystallisation process" not only basic (permanent) moral categories but also near basic (semi-permanent) moral categories find their way into language and thought. The permanent and semi-permanent categories Berlin distinguishes in the epistemological field (see chapter 5.2) (CC: 9), also apply to the moral field. The more basic these moral categories are, the more permanent they are. The basic moral categories are, strictly speaking, not necessary for survival but add a certain basic quality of life. Examples of such a basic/semi permanent category are equal treatment and the respect for privacy. I will deal with "privacy" in the next section and take up the issue of equal treatment here.

Equal treatment is a deep-rooted principle in human thought that, according to Berlin, "has been assimilated into many systems, those of the utilitarians and the theories of natural right, as well as various religious doctrines" (CC: 101). It appears to be a basic value, but in fact it refers to a certain conception of the good life. It therefore belongs at the conventional level which is not universally shared. However, our near basic moral categories can be very precious to us. How can we protect them from (radical) subjectivism and relativism? Berlin makes use of the notion of the *philosophia perennis*.

The Philosophia Perennis

The *philosophia perennis* is the (Western) tradition that contains the lasting thoughts of the Jewish, Greek, Christian and Humanist traditions (RR: 141). It was originally a Roman Catholic concept (Jahanbegloo 1992: 33) that contains not only profound wisdom but also some ideas that, in Berlin's eyes, are clearly wrong but have managed to survive (POI: 6). Examples of those ideas are monism and teleology. Berlin regards it as the main task of philosophy, as we have seen in chapter 5.2, to trace these "wrong" concepts and categories and alter them if possible. The *philosophia perennis* also contains the Enlightenment heritage with regard to freedom and human rights. We have seen the critical position Berlin takes with regard to the monism Enlightenment thinkers tend to embrace. Yet he had a deep respect for the Enlightenment attack on religious authority and dogma, its campaign for human rights (including tolerance and social and racial equality) and personal freedom from state tyranny and its faith in human reason itself.

Reference to the *philosophia perennis* enables Berlin to give more weight to those moral categories that, strictly speaking, are not necessary for human survival or basic social life and belong at the conventional level. In the meantime these near basic values have, however, become so important to us that we do not want to be deprived of them and would even suffer (but not die) if that did happen.

Limiting Subjectivity

To his interviewer, Ramin Jahanbegloo, Berlin says that he regards "modern man" not only as a child of Romanticism but also of the *philosophia perennis*: "we inherit both these traditions [Romanticism and the *philosophia perennis*], objective discovery and subjective creation, and oscillate between them, and try vainly to combine them, or ignore their incompatibility" (Jahanbegloo 1992: 159) For Berlin, the *philosophia perennis* contains ideas and values that in the course of history have transcended subjectivity, despite their human origin. Berlin compares the *philosophia perennis* with a river, with a central tradition:

> New streams can be created—in the West, by Christianity, or Luther, or the Renaissance, or the Romantic movement but in the end they derive from a single river, an underlying central tradition, which, sometimes in radically altered forms, survives. (Gardel 1991: 22)

This central tradition has been accepted by generations and has proven its worth. This means that arbitrary changes in values that belong to the *philosophia perennis* would stir up a revolt, as infringements of natural law would cause horror. Of course, propaganda can manipulate our moral views temporarily. The *philosophia perennis* was seriously cracked by the "unbridled" Romantics and the Marxists and Nazis, but, in Berlin's view, it has not been destroyed. We are still members of "some kind of unified tradition" (Jahanbegloo 1992: 159).

In chapter 4.1 we saw that Berlin seeks to evade radical subjectivism by reference to communities to which human beings always belong. The drawback of this approach was that Berlin could secure only the possibility of diachronic judgement (within a tradition). By reference to the *philosophia perennis* a more synchronic judgement (between traditions) becomes possible.

The existence of the *philosophia perennis* limits radical subjectivism and gives values a realist and objective nature. It gives an important explanation for Berlin why (subjective) values can have such an intense pull on us that in moral dilemma's they can tear us apart. We saw in the previous section that in the radical subjectivist position, value conflicts would in fact become inconceivable as individual subjects could decide against a certain value. Berlin's reference to the *philosophia perennis* is, however, not fully satisfying. It is able to limit radical subjectivitiy because most people are still unaware that their values are human creations and still believe that these values are objective and real, that their values are not a construct of Western thought but pre-given either by God or nature. In chapter 6.5 we will see how Berlin deals with the scepticism that could arise when that belief is abandoned.

The radius of action of the *philosophia perennis,* however, is restricted to the Western tradition or Western educated persons who also have been in touch with the Romantic revolution that liberated people from their pre-given structures. In our world of plurality, however, there are also cultures (even within the Western world) in which people experience themselves as living in a pre-given system in which everything has its appointed place to which they should surrender themselves (SR: 239). Thus they still understand themselves as discoverers and not as creators of values.

6.3 INTERMEZZO: THREE LEVELS OF LIBERTY

In political philosophy Isaiah Berlin is the philosopher whose name is indissolubly connected with liberty. Now that we have seen the distinction Berlin made between the natural level of basic values and the conventional level of values, the question arises: On which level does liberty belong? Is liberty a basic need or is it only conducive to the good life? There is also an intermediate category Berlin distinguishes, namely the semi-permanent or near basic values that are needed for a basic quality of life and are present in many (but not all) cultures. In this section we will see that liberty belongs to all three of these categories. Berlin himself does not demarcate too rigidly the borders of the above three categories. In his view, it is a "matter of infinite debate" (FEL: 126; L: 126).

Liberty as a Basic Moral Category

Liberty belongs first of all to the basic moral categories, as we can see in the following quote:

> We must preserve a minimum area of personal freedom if we are not to "degrade or deny our nature." 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 human nature. (FEL: 126; L: 173)

Liberty, understood as the preservation of the power of choice, is a basic moral category for Berlin. He realises that in a value pluralist world negative liberty has to be traded in sometimes to secure other values and that we cannot remain absolutely free. But this trade-off should leave a certain area of personal freedom untouched. If this personal freedom is surrendered, Berlin holds that the "essence" itself of human nature is offended. (Berlin, who is a committed anti-essentialist, nonetheless needs this essence to protect human beings from this form of dehumanization.) During the Holocaust this human essence was seriously cracked. In a personal letter to his friend George Kennan (1951) Berlin writes that what makes the Second World War more shocking than other wars is not so much the slaughtering of armies by other armies but the Nazi denial of the power of choice of the victims. In the death camps a "destruction of their personality" took place by

> creating unequal moral terms between the gaoler and the victim, whereby the gaoler knows what he is doing, and why, and plays upon the victim, i.e. treats him as a mere object and not as a subject whose motives, views, intentions have any intrinsic weight whatever—by destroying the very possibility of his having views, notions of a relevant kind—that is what cannot be borne at all (L: 339).

Not only during the Nazi regime but also in the Soviet Union human beings were used as objects or, in Kantian terms, only as means and not as ends in themselves. What Berlin turns "inside out" is the spectacle of "... one set of persons who so tamper and 'get at' others that the others do their will without knowing what they are doing; and in this lose their status of free human beings, indeed as human beings at all" (L: 339). In this personal letter Berlin even calls depriving people of this capacity for freedom "the real sin against the Holy Ghost" (L: 340):

> Everything else is bearable so long as the possibility of goodness—of a state of affairs in which men freely choose, disinterestedly seek ends for their own sake—is still open, however much suffering they may have gone through. Their souls are destroyed only when this is no longer possible. It is when the desire for choice is broken that what men do thereby loses all moral value, and actions lose all significance (in terms of good and evil) in their own eyes; that is what is meant by destroying people's self-respect, by turning them, in your words, into rags. This is the ultimate horror because in such a situation there are no worthwhile motives left: nothing is worth doing or avoiding, the reasons for existing are gone. (L: 340)

For Berlin, this destruction of liberty is more than the denial of liberty of action. In depriving people of this capacity for freedom not only their personalities and self-respect are destroyed but also their reasons for living.

Liberty as a "Near Basic" Moral Category

For Berlin, the absolute minimum of liberty as described above is not enough to face a world characterised by value pluralism. An extended area of liberty is needed to deal with the inevitable value conflicts in life. Our values and ends are not always compatible and within the good there are conflicts. This means that human beings will always be confronted with situations where they have to make choices:

> The world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others. Indeed it is because this is their situation that men place such immense value upon the freedom to choose; for if they had assurance that in some perfect state, realizable by men 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 the freedom to choose. (FEL: 168)

This quote contains a tacit "fact-value" mistake (naturalistic fallacy) that could be criticised, but this text should be understood in the wider context of his essay "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958). Berlin is not making a logical proposition here but is seeking an explanation for why human beings are often so willing to give up their (negative) individual liberty. They do so in order to realise religious or ideological values and ends that are deemed to be more essential to fundamental human needs (FEL: 169; L: 114). The category of thought behind that is monism, the deeper belief in the existence of one true end, either for personal life or for society, that promises a perfect, frictionless existence and the consequent desire to live according to one correct way of life. In that case, the negative concept of liberty is rejected "in favour of its positive counterpart" (FEL: 141; L: 187) (see also chapter 1.3). Berlin's view of the moral universe and human nature is different. He is convinced that the possibility of conflict can never be wholly eliminated from human life. "The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition" (FEL: 169; L: 215) and if we realised that, we would truly value freedom.

Despite these monist tendencies that are detrimental to the valuation of individual freedom, fortunately notions such as individualism and respect for privacy have also entered Western thought. Through a historical crystallisation process they have become part of our near basic moral categories and are here to stay. Berlin describes this process in "The Birth of Greek Individualism" (1962) published in *Liberty* (2002). In this essay Berlin defines individualism as the doctrine that there are personal values—pleasure, or knowledge, or friendship, or virtue, or self-expression in art of life—to which political and social arrangements should be subordinated (L: 299). Berlin describes how individualism as an idea was born in Western history of ideas, mainly under the influence of the Stoics and Epicur-

eans. Berlin also suspects the influence of the Jewish Bible (through Philo of Alexandria) in which there is the notion of "individual responsibility to God that is no longer communal in Jeremiah, in Ezekiel and in the Psalms" (L: 316). The classic Greeks still conceived human beings in "essentially social terms," but when the notion of individualism was born, more attention was given to the inner life and personal relationships of persons. In this essay Berlin also describes how in Western history the notion of individualism gradually became a basic source on which the later notions of individual rights and the sacredness of private life were built (L: 318). Berlin clearly shows that the notions of individualism and privacy are notions that have a history. In contemporary Western thought these accepted values have become basic, yet they have a contingent origin. To secure this near basic moral category, it is possible to refer to the (Western) *philosophia perennis* in which moral notions like individualism and privacy have crystallised and are here to stay.

As a historian of ideas Berlin describes only the Western world. Outside the Western world notions such as respect for individual liberty and privacy may not have entered the common way of thinking. If there are also ruling monist views of the good at the same time, then that explains why personal freedom and freedom of choice in these cultures are easily traded in for other (often ideologically and religiously inspired) values.

Liberty as a Competing Positive Value

Liberty can also be understood as an ideal for personal life and society. It is freedom in the sense of "the attainment of the greatest degree of individual liberty" (FEL: 161; L: 207). In contemporary terms we are referring here to "comprehensive liberalism,"[43] the political framework in which liberty is cherished as a positive value. (Comprehensive) liberalism reflects a specific vision of the good in which personal freedom (within the limits of the damage principle) is promoted. In (moral) education, for instance, a (comprehensive) liberal

[43] The term that John Rawls used in *Political Liberalism* (1993) for liberalism as a specific vision of the good is "comprehensive liberalism." Rawls also used the term "political liberalism" for the set of liberal values (often constitutional liberties) that serve as an umbrella under which other comprehensive doctrines, such as social democracy, Christian democracy and conservatism, can operate.

will put more emphasis on autonomy and critical reflection than modesty and obedience to authority. In economics and private life a (comprehensive) liberal will try to reduce government interference where he can.

As a value pluralist, Berlin realises that in a value pluralist world liberalism is a political and moral framework that has to compete with others. Yet, together with his friend Bernard Williams, Berlin comes to the conclusion that so far liberalism has brought more social and political stability than other systems (Berlin and Williams 1994: 306-09). More than other (comprehensive) political systems (such as social democracy, Christian democracy, or conservatism), liberalism has been better able to accommodate diversity. The general liberal explanation for this is that liberalism has always been reluctant to forbid activities by citizens purely on the basis of a common vision of the good which people may or may not share. Restrictions in freedom can only be justified on negative grounds, if they are clearly damaging to others. Under a comprehensive liberal system, religious people can still decide for themselves not to do things they find wrong for religious reasons (such as euthanasia or shopping on Sundays). Under a religious political framework such activities would probably be forbidden. This means that non-religious people or those of other religions have no choice. Because they do not share the same vision of the good, they will resist these (for them) unnecessary limitations in freedom, leading to more social unrest in society.

It should be noted that, in his commitment to liberalism, Berlin makes an exception with regard to the cosmopolitan variant of liberalism. For him, this is based on a specific vision of the good that seeks world peace by stimulating people to become citizens of the world and to detach themselves from their ethnic and religious roots (see chapter 4.5). The non-cosmopolitan variant of the liberal vision of the good is much more modest. It is committed only to securing values such as liberty, diversity, peace, respect and tolerance. Because it holds these values, it cannot be called completely neutral but only approximately neutral, as it must exclude certain fanatical and intolerant groups within society (see also chapter 4.4 and 4.5 and Lukes 1991: 121).

One can conclude that, for Berlin, the relationship between value pluralism and liberty is not as agonistic as John Gray claims it is (see chapter 1.3). Without respect for a basic power of choice (level 1) and without a certain area of negative liberty in which an individual can

choose between competing values and between different views of the good life (level 2), there cannot be such a thing as a pluralist society. Furthermore, in history, liberalism has brought more social and political stability than other systems (level 3).

6.4 The Basic Category of a "Normal Man"

For Berlin, the presence of basic moral (and epistemological) categories can also be traced in our language, in our way of thinking, our concepts and categories. This is especially so with respect to the basic category of a "normal man."

> What these rules or commandments will have in common is that they are accepted so widely, and are 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 a normal human being*. (FEL: 165; L: 210; italics mine).

Our basic concept of a "normal" human being is, for Berlin, not just a verbal definition but a basic category that determines the way we think. When we define a human being, all basic categories come into play:

> The basic categories (with their corresponding concepts) in terms of which we define men—such notions as society, freedom, sense of time and change, suffering, happiness, productivity, good and bad, right and wrong, choice, effort, truth, illusion (to take them wholly at random)—are not matters of induction or hypotheses. To think of someone as a human being is *ipso facto* to bring all these notions into play: so that to say of someone that he is a man, but that choice, or the notion of truth mean nothing to him, would be eccentric; it would clash with what we mean by "man" not as a matter of verbal definition (which is alterable at will), but as intrinsic to the way in which we think, and (as a matter of "brute" fact) evidently cannot but think. (CC: 166; italics mine)

In the basic category of a normal human being, there is a mixture of basic notions (at the natural level) and political categories (at the conventional level). Berlin realises that it is difficult to disentangle both categories because in the course of history both have become part of our way of thinking. Yet, for Berlin, this mixture does not lead to moral and cultural relativism:

> But if I find a man to whom it literally makes no difference whether he kicks a pebble or kills his family, since either would be an antidote to *ennui* or inactivity, I shall not be disposed, like consistent relativists, to attribute to him merely a different code of morality from my own or that of most men, or declare that we disagree on essentials, but shall begin to speak of insanity or inhumanity; I shall be inclined to consider him mad, as a man who thinks he is Napoleon is mad; which is a way of saying that I do not regard such a being as being fully a man at all. (CC: 166)

Berlin argues that there are clear cases (such as killing without pressing reasons or claiming to be a dead person) in which our basic notions and values are transgressed. Not only in our own but in all cultures persons who commit these acts will be considered to be mad or insane.

Berlin's position contrasts for instance with the view that Alasdair MacIntyre takes in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988). For MacIntyre, what "we" regard as "normal" is in practice nothing more than simply an abstraction of the prevalent criteria in a particular tradition, usually the Western tradition. In MacIntyre's position our rational and moral considerations cannot be divorced from time and place. Berlin, in contrast, believes in a basic rationality and morality independent of historical and social contexts. (This limits Berlin's value pluralist position; we will return to this below in the concluding remarks of this section.)

Moral Idiots

Our world also includes persons who are not endowed with this basic morality. When basic moral categories are absent from a person's behaviour, we speak, according to Berlin, of insanity or inhumanity. In the following quote Berlin makes a distinction between "fellow human beings" and "moral idiots:"

> But there are also certain moral properties which enter equally deeply into what we conceive as a human nature. If we meet someone who merely disagrees with us about the ends of life, who prefers happiness to self-sacrifice, or knowledge to friendship, we accept them as fellow human beings, because their notion of what is an end, the arguments they bring to defend their ends, and their general behaviour, are within the limits of what we regard as being human. But if we meet someone who cannot see why (to take a famous example) he should not destroy

> the world in order to relieve a pain in his little finger, or someone who genuinely sees no harm in condemning innocent men, or betraying friends, or torturing children, then we find that we cannot argue with such people, not so much because we are horrified as because we think them in some way inhuman—we call them moral idiots. We sometimes confine them in lunatic asylums. (CTH: 203)

Berlin's criteria for insanity are not only wanton killing and pretending to be Napoleon (CC: 166), but also seeing no harm in torturing children, condemning innocent men and betraying friends.

At first sight Berlin seems to be making a rather simple division in this quote (CTH: 203) between normal and insane human beings who break basic moral rules. But when we read carefully, we see another line of demarcation. The division between normal and insane human beings is not so much the atrocity of the acts itself but the extent to which we can understand the ends and reasons behind them. What we can understand has its limits. There are many moral principles within Berlin's value pluralism, but they are not infinite. For Berlin, the scope of values and ends is finite because he thinks that

> in the end there is something called human nature. It's modifiable, it takes different forms in different cultures but unless there were a human nature, the very notion of human beings would become unintelligible. (Lukes 1998: 105)

Values and ends must fall within the human horizon, otherwise we cannot conceive them (CHT: 11). Of course, lack of morality plays a role in considering a person to be a moral idiot, but it is more important for Berlin that we can somehow imagine, although we abhor the acts morally, why people act that way. There are reasons and ends behind the acts of the Nazis, so they cannot just be dismissed as moral idiots. It is important to note here that Berlin separates moral condemnation from (epistemic) understanding. We will see in chapter 7.2 how this idea affects Berlin's account of evil and the Holocaust.

But what falls within and outside the human horizon? Berlin is not very clear about the exact boundaries. One of Berlin's interviewers, Steven Lukes, asked if sadism belongs to the human ends that are intelligible. Berlin answers positively, with the restriction that

> psychologists tell me that sadistic ends are not truly what people aim for, because the desire to inflict pain arises because you have had cer-

> tain traumas in your childhood, or something of that sort, and does not do for you what you truly seek. (Lukes 1998: 118)

Being able to understand an end is not the same as respecting that end in the Kantian sense. Sadism tramples on too many people's rights and deprives people of free and satisfying lives, so it should be diminished or eliminated (Lukes 1998: 118-19). Berlin thus makes a distinction between understanding and condemning. In the next chapter about evil we see the consequences of this view.

From a conventionalist position criticism could be raised against Berlin's distinction between normal people and moral idiots. It is a way to escape the consequences of a previous mistake. Berlin assumes that there is a universal natural morality. If the idea of the natural morality is regarded as a construct of the human mind, the deviations need not be explained by declaring certain people as mad.

In Possession of Moral Feelings

For Berlin, a "normal" human being is also endowed with moral feelings. He or she feels "moral revulsion" and horror when basic moral laws are broken (FEL: 166; L: 211).

> When I speak of *a man as being normal,* a part of what I mean is that he could not break these rules easily, *without a qualm of revulsion*. It is such rules as that are broken when a man is declared guilty without trial, or punished under a retroactive law; when children are ordered to denounce their parents, friends to betray one another, solders to use methods of barbarism; when men are tortured or murdered, or minorities are massacred because they irritate a majority or a tyrant. Such acts, even if they are made legal 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 of one man's will on another. (FEL: 166; L: 211; italics mine)

Berlin also uses the notion of "a person of normal moral sensitiveness" to deal with the moral problem of self-interested and parasitical behaviour. Berlin gives the example of not paying for a bus ticket (CC: 97). In Berlin's view, however, a person with a normal moral sensitiveness would soon realise that, if others followed his example, the busses would stop running. He would

> ... cheat in this manner only with considerable qualms—qualms derived not merely from the fact that he has broken a contract, but from the sense of the unfairness of what he was doing. Indeed liability to such qualms is among the very criteria of what we call moral sensitiveness. (CC: 97)

In Berlin's view, normal human beings are drawn by considerations such "as the sanctity of promises, the social need to keep one's word and preserve the rule of law and the social order, the intrinsic desirability of avoiding unfairness, and so on" (CC: 98).

Berlin wrote this in 1956, at a time when the British people were famous in the world for their perfect queues at bus stops. Berlin took the presence of moral feelings and the willingness to take a moral point of view for granted. But in our time of individualisation and fading norms and values we realise that the simple question "Why be moral?" is not so easy to answer (Frankena 1980: 85-94). This question could be answered by referring to rationality or prudence. Human life would be miserable without morality. But for prudent individuals, who seek the best for themselves, it could be personally (especially in the short term) quite profitable to make exceptions of themselves while others continue to obey the rules and uphold the system. When people no longer feel deeply attached to their communities and believe that they have only one life to live without any final judgement, without any higher goal, they would be prudent to seek the best for themselves at the expense of others. Furthermore, the presence of natural moral feelings is no longer considered to be innate but a result of moral education which itself has become suspicious since it can also lead to unproductive feelings of guilt and shame. What we see here is that, with regard to the existence of moral feelings, Berlin probably took his own context (the England of the 1950s) as universal.

6.5 Scepticism and the Lack of Idealism

We have seen in the previous sections that Berlin uses a combination of approaches to combat radical relativism, namely reference to a common human nature that is able to suffer, reference to the Western (historical) tradition (*philosophia perennis)* and reference to language (the basic category of a normal human being). The combination of them should rule out the radical relativist idea that: "The Nazis believe in concentration camps and we don't" and there is no more to say (Jahanbegloo 1992: 107).

Especially for the near basic moral categories, Berlin cannot claim eternal validity. Yet in "Two Concepts of Liberty" we find an optimistic Berlin who thinks that such an insight need not lead to sceptical conclusions:

> Principles are not less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed. Indeed, the very desire for guarantees that our values are eternal and secure in some objective heaven is perhaps only a craving for the certainties of childhood or the absolute values of our primitive past (FEL: 172; L: 217)

Berlin trusts that modern human beings are capable of overcoming their immature metaphysical needs and can reach a certain level of adulthood in the moral sense.

Berlin is also aware that the notion that there are no eternal values could lead to motivational problems in the ideological and moral areas. People would be less committed to their values and no longer stand unflinchingly for their ideals. Again, Berlin is positive that this need not happen. He ends his famous essay "Two Concepts of Liberty" with the following quote:

> "To realise the relative validity of one's convictions", said an admirable writer of our time [Joseph Schumpeter], "and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian." To demand more than this is perhaps a deep and incurable metaphysical need; but to allow it to determine one's practice is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity. (FEL: 172; L: 217)

Without the security of an objective realm where our positive basic values are permanently grounded, human beings can still be inspired and motivated by their ideals. So, for Berlin, the subjective nature of most of our values (or their "relative validity") does not necessarily lead to non-stringency and non-commitment. It is a matter of civilisation to remain faithful to one's own convictions.

Objections

What remains unexplained in Berlin's work is how existentially and morally 'mature' people, fully aware of the subjectivist and constructivist nature of their values, can still experience the pain of a moral conflict when they sacrifice precious values. Strictly speaking, they could decide to abandon those values that cause pain. As already stated in the previous section, in a radical subjectivist position value

conflicts become inconceivable. Unfortunately, this remains an unresolved issue in Berlin's work. On the one hand Berlin needs a subjecttivist ontology to explain moral diversity and change. On the other hand, he must assume a realist ontology to explain the agonizing effects of value conflicts. It is difficult to combine these two differentent ontologies. Berlin, however, is aware of their incompatibility: "we inherit both these traditions [Romanticism and the *philosophia perennis*], objective discovery and subjective creation, and oscillate between them, and try vainly to combine them, or ignore their incomepatibility" (Jahanbegloo 1992: 159)

Another objection is that with regard to moral motivation and social engagement Berlin is probably too optimistic. The problem is not only the awareness that our values and ideas would have no eternal validity but also the perennial presence of value conflicts themselves. There is always a negative side-effect connected with our pursuit of ideals and this could lead to the conclusion that it is senseless to pursue any ideal at all. We are simply confronted with the other side of the coin. For instance, establishing a wildlife park in Africa may be good for protecting endangered species but at the same time it denies the African hunter and his family of an important means of living. Sending flying doctors to South Africa may save children's lives, but it also leads to an increase of the local population and consequently a further encroachment on the forests and the extinction of species. The value pluralist (and in the meantime also the postmodernist) awareness that there is always a price to be paid for pursuing an ideal leads to a lack of idealism. To put it cynically, the only people who really seem to devote their energy to an ideal are young monists who still lack the real-life experiences that would allow them to see the value conflicts they inevitably evoke.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter started with the question of whether Berlin's value pluralism could lead to moral relativity. If we follow Herder, as value pluralists we may judge cultures only from within. There is no higher court of appeal and we would have nothing with which other cultures could be judged negatively. By adopting Hampshire's two-layer account of moral requirements, Berlin is able to distinguish basic values that are needed on the natural level to cope with the vulnerable human condition and positive values on a conventional level that are aimed at realising a certain view of the good life. By claiming

objectivity or universality only for the first type, Berlin avoids moral relativism and safeguards diversity at the same time.

With this 'weak universalist' view, Berlin deviates from conventionalist perspectives, such as held by Alasdair MacIntyre. For them there are no epistemic and moral universals, so there can be situations of incommensurability between cultures and languages. What we consider to be universal in matters of rationality and justice is usually a product of our own (usually Western) context. Particularly alarming with regard to Berlin's position is that conventionalists do not recognise the universal ability to make a distinction between a basic (natural) morality and convention. They even regard the idea of a basic (natural) morality itself as a (typically Western) philosophical construct. This means that, in their view, Berlin cannot properly explain deviations from this basic natural morality and cannot but declare the people who breach this basic morality as "moral idiots."

Berlin tacitly assumes a realist ontology with regard to basic morality. This does not mean that Berlin believes in a heaven or realm beyond time and change where these values can be found. For Berlin these values are only independent of human constructions only in that they are—in a way—pre-given by nature. With regard to the values at the conventional level, Berlin defends a subjectivist (constructivist) ontology. In this way Berlin can secure the values he needs for a decent society, whilst at the same time respect moral and cultural diversity. For conventionalists, the morality at the natural level that Berlin considers to be real is a typical construction of the (Western) human mind. The subjectivist and constructivist nature of values also raises unexplained problems in Berlin's work with regard to the possibility of value conflicts. If values are a result of human constructions, moral dilemma's become inconceivable as it becomes possible for the individual subject to abandon those values that cause pain.

An unforeseen consequence of Berlin's two-layer solution is that he must limit the extent of his own incommensurability thesis, which states that, due to pluralism, there is no pre-given higher yardstick for deciding which of the conflicting values should have priority. But is Berlin not actually establishing this missing yardstick by his distinction between basic morality and morality to uphold a way of life? It now becomes possible to consider values connected with the group's identity to be less important than values for securing safety, fair treatment and sufficient supply of food. By providing this standard, Berlin

overcomes an important source of moral relativism, but how far is Berlin still a true value pluralist?

Berlin limits the extent of the incommensurability thesis considerably, but this does not do away with his incommensurability thesis completely. In our non-harmonious and tragic moral universe, there are still difficult dilemmas to resolve for which there are no pre-given standards and solutions. Especially when the conflicting values belong to the same (often the basic) level, agonising choices still have to be made. For instance, in the case of a terrorist attack that threatens innocent deaths there can be serious dilemmas. Breaching basic moral principles such as torture may be considered to obtain key information that may reduce the number of casualties. In resolving these conflicts, there are no pre-given answers.

We have seen that, for Berlin, the source of values is not "an objective heaven." We can find them in basic natural needs, in human nature and in a historical crystallisation process of values in language and thought. It contains not only basic values but also semi-basic values that, strictly speaking, belong to the conventional level of Western thought but have become so basic to us that we can no longer do without them. By invoking the *philosophia perennis* Berlin seeks to avoid radical relativism with his near basic values. He also refers to the basic category of "human beings." Berlin cannot completely avoid moral relativism as he cannot guarantee the eternal permanency of our near basic values. Yet the combination of approaches should avoid the relativist attitude that "anything goes."

Liberty is a complicated value to justify as it is a basic, near basic and a conventional value. Defined as the protection of the power of choice, liberty belongs to the basic values. Seen as respect for a certain area of individual choice, it belongs—at least in the Western history of thought—to the near basic values. Viewed as the pursuit of maximal personal freedom, liberty has to compete with other comprehensive political systems.

In this chapter we have seen Berlin's optimism, not only with regard to the existence of moral feelings that control self-interested and parasitical behaviour but also with respect to the possibility of gaining existential maturity to act in line with non-eternal and self-made rules. The Holocaust did not change Berlin's belief in a basic morality. Instead of adopting a darker view of human nature, Berlin celebrated the return of the ancient notions of natural law that the Holocaust brought about as proof that there is actually a basic moral-

ity. In the next chapter we will go deeper into this optimism and Berlin's complex thinking on (humanly inflicted) evil.

CHAPTER 7

Blinded by Wrong Concepts and Categories

In this chapter we will look at Berlin's complex thinking on evil. In chapter 1 we have seen that an important source of human conflict (and therefore of evil inflicted by humans) are the limitations in human existence. There is a scarcity of resources, the lifespan of a human being is limited and we can only be in one place at one time. The values and ends that we pursue can be incompatible and because of pluralism there can be incommensurability in our evaluative (moral, aesthetic and epistemological) frameworks. But, for Berlin, there is also another source of evil. He holds that human beings can be blinded by concepts and categories that cause misery and evil. In addition to this "unintended evil," Berlin's anthropology also includes the notion of intended evil. We will see, however, that Berlin downplays the darker sides of human nature and that he provides good reasons for doing so.

7.1 THE LACK OF AWARENESS OF "WRONG" CONCEPTS

In the previous chapter we have seen that Berlin believes in the existence of a basic morality and that human beings do not always comply with that basic morality. There are "moral idiots" whose acts are both insane and inhumane and there are sane human beings who act under the influence of "wrong" concepts and categories. In Berlin's view, this latter group can be "cured." Human beings are able to reflect critically on the concepts and categories that have shaped their thinking and, if necessary, alter them.

An example of an idea that causes unnecessary suffering and evil is the denial of the non-harmonious nature of the moral universe and the monism that results from that denial. This negation leads to having no hesitation in imposing one's own vision of the good on others in order to reach harmony. Monism justifies serious limitations in the personal freedom to pursue one's own (or religious) vision of the good and even leads to justifying the removal of opponents who stand in the way of reaching the envisioned utopias.

For Berlin the non-harmonious nature of the moral universe itself is an important source of human conflict. There are tensions between cultures, between groups and within the individual person herself, of-

ten leading to real conflicts, with all its "evil" consequences. Yet the negative consequences of these conflicts can be reduced because human beings have the ability to deal with the non-perfect situation in which we have to live and make choices. Philosophy plays an important role in this human capacity. In chapter 5 we have seen that, for Berlin, the purpose of philosophy is to reduce confusion, misery and fear on earth by exposing "blind adherence to outworn notions" (CC: 11). In the closing passage of "The Purpose of Philosophy" (1962) Berlin expresses the following hope:

> If there is to be any *hope of a rational order on earth*, or of *a just appreciation of the many various interests that divide diverse groups of human beings*—knowledge that is indispensable to any attempt to assess their effects, and the patterns of their interplay and its consequences, in order to find *viable compromises* through which men may continue to live and satisfy their desires without thereby crushing the equally central desires and needs of others—it lies in the bringing to light of these models, social, moral political, and above all the underlying metaphysical patterns in which they are rooted, with a view to examining whether they are adequate to their task. (CC: 11; italics mine)

This reference to "hope" shows that Berlin's philosophy is in the deepest sense also a *Weltanschauung* (see also chapter 5.2). His philosophy even contains a therapeutic, perhaps soteriological, function: it includes a diagnosis of the human predicament and a solution as to how what is seen as the basic flaw can be overcome (Smith 1994: 10). Berlin's "soteriology," however, is a very special one, as it warns people against the utopian soteriological function within their religions or worldviews. For Berlin, these soteriologies are not the solution but the cause of much of the evil afflicted by humans.

At first glance Berlin's view resembles the way Socrates (or Plato) explains evil. For Socrates evil is also caused by faulty beliefs, but there is a difference between his view and Berlin's. Socrates assumes that "virtue is knowledge" (see also chapter 2.1). According to this view, people commit crimes because they are in error; they are mistaken with respect to that which will profit them. For Socrates, there is unintended and intended evil. With regard to the former, an agent fails to calculate correctly the consequences of some action. With regard to the latter, an agent expects some personal advantage. Again, the cause is a faulty belief, but now it is one of what is regarded as beneficial.

People seek health, wealth, pleasure and honour, but for Socrates these values have no intrinsic value. The only thing that is good in itself is virtue and ill-gotten wealth or honour or pleasure will in the end not benefit those who obtain these things this way (*Euthydemus*:281d-e; see Brickhouse 2000: 219-20).

For Berlin evil is also caused by faulty beliefs, but he rejects the Socratic doctrine of "virtue is knowledge." The reason for this is that it presupposes a monistic and teleological view of what constitutes the good and which forms of life are the best and worthiest (CTH: 28-29). It is based on the idea that "if you know the good for man, you cannot, if you are a rational being, live in any way other than that whereby fulfilment is that towards which all desires, hopes, prayers, aspirations are directed" (CTH: 29). For Berlin, there is a plurality of visions of the good, each with its own set of virtues. The ideals and virtues of the Homeric hero were different from those of Thomas Aquinas. For Berlin, the monist assumptions behind the Platonic doctrine of "virtue is knowledge" animated the utopian movements of the past centuries. With all its totalitarian consequences this idea has been a great source of evil itself.

Although, like Socrates, Berlin holds that evil is caused by faulty beliefs, he differs in what he considers to be faulty. What is faulty is not the deviation from a specific vision of the good that is believed to be true. Rather, a belief is, as we have seen in chapter 5.2, morally faulty when it causes human misery and epistemologically faulty when it does not cohere with the whole and cannot properly account for things that happen.

7.2 Innately Evil?

As a historian of ideas, Berlin cannot deny intentional evil in human beings. However, in his work the tragic aspect of evil, unintentional evil, receives the most emphasis. The moral universe in which we live is not harmonious. Often, despite good human intentions, there is conflict within the idea of the good, leading to all kinds of potential conflicts. We have seen in the previous section that human beings are in this respect not passive and have the intellectual ability to reduce the evil consequences of unavoidable value conflicts.

For Berlin, there is also human malice, intentional evil. He realises that human beings can become wolves who will eat the sheep. We cannot grant too much negative liberty to human beings, otherwise other values will be crushed. Berlin is careful with allocating roots of

evil. He does not, for instance, regard private possessions, greed or alienation as important causes of intentional evil, as humanists influenced by Marxism do. Berlin does not want to ignore the positive abilities in humans. To deal with the dark aspects of human nature without becoming too pessimistic, Berlin finds inspiration in the works of both Kant and Montesquieu.

We have seen above (chapter 1.1) that Berlin uses the Kantian notion of "the crooked timber of humanity" to indicate the tensions within human nature due to the presence of value conflicts. The original context in which Kant used this quote, however, was different, but Berlin can also make use of that context in a changed form. The "crooked timber" metaphor originates from Kant's *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (1784), one of his "small works" in which he writes his version of the philosophy of history and reflects, amongst others, on the propensity (*Hang*)[44] to will evil maxims. This propensity to evil makes it necessary to restrain human beings, whilst in an ideal situation autonomous human beings ought to be free. Apart from this propensity to evil, Kant also recognises positive aspects in human nature, which enables a civil society to develop. For Kant, human beings can learn to become good citizens and they even have the potentiality to become "citizens of the world" under a league of nations and a system of human rights. The ground of this optimistic belief in moral progress is religious, namely his Christian belief that God has a plan for humankind. Kant does not believe that human beings can become perfect because they are inclined to evil and they can even become radically evil.[45] For Kant, human beings are not destined to do evil; they can also become morally good and therefore improvements in human life are always possible.

Although Kant's *Idee* contains too much religious and metaphysical thinking for Berlin's taste, it touches on the problem he is also facing, namely that it is not possible to give human beings full liberty, as that would inevitably mean the end of the liberty of the sheep.

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[44] This propensity (German: *Hang*) seems to give the impression that human beings are causally compelled to choose evil. However, in Kant's view, we are able to overcome evil and remain completely responsible for our evil actions (Bernstein 2002: 20, 31-32).

[45] According to Richard Bernstein (2002: 39-41) radical evil is the willingness to ignore or subordinate the moral law when it interferes with nonmoral but natural inclinations.

Berlin knows that human beings can become wolves, so their liberty cannot be infinite (FEL: 170; L: 215). Montesquieu discussed this idea in a much more secularised way, a way which Berlin could appreciate. Berlin praises Montesquieu for having a wisdom similar to Kant's:

> It is true that [Montesquieu] did not believe that man was in a state of original sin; but neither did he believe that he was infinitely perfectible. He believed that man was not impotent, only weak, that he could be made stronger, yet only with the greatest difficulty, and even then not very strong ….. "Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made", said Immanuel Kant, and this represents Montesquieu's view against that of his friends, the optimistic planners of his day (AC: 148-49)

With the help of Montesquieu and Kant Berlin can reject both extremes, namely the idea that human beings can become perfect and the idea that human beings are in a state of original sin. The first idea is impossible for Berlin due to the inner tensions caused by value pluralism. He dismisses the second idea, the state of original sin, also since that could lead to the idea that human beings are impotent. Because it is also impossible to deny evil in human nature, Berlin uses the Kantian "crooked timber" metaphor not in its original (religiously influenced) setting but in a secular and less dramatic way to indicate that human beings are merely weak. The reason for that is that Berlin sees great danger in exaggerating the dark side of human nature.

The Dangers of Emphasising the Evil Side of Humans

A very dark view of human nature can be found in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century French Catholic conservative Joseph de Maistre. Berlin examined his ideas in an effort to understand fascism. De Maistre was opposed to the French Revolution and functioned as an important advisor to some of the remaining royal houses in Europe. For Berlin, a view of human nature that emphasises human malignity is fuel for fascism. He describes De Maistre's dark view of human nature as follows:

> In place of the ideals of progress, liberty, and human perfectibility, he preached salvation by faith and tradition. He dwelt on the incurably bad and corrupt nature of man, and consequently the unavoidable need for authority, hierarchy, obedience and subjection. In place of science he preached the primacy of instinct, Christian wisdom, prejudice

> (which is but the fruit of experience of generations), blind faith; in place of optimism, pessimism; in place of eternal harmony and eternal peace, the necessity—the divine necessity—of conflict and suffering, sin and retribution, bloodshed and war. In place of the ideals of peace and social equality, founded on the common interests and natural goodness of man, he asserted the inherent inequality and violent conflict of aims and interests as being the normal condition of fallen man and the nations to which he belonged. (CTH: 108-09)

Such a dark view of human nature justifies "authority, hierarchy, obedience and subjection," i.e. the need for a strong leader. If human beings are innately and naturally violent, an authoritative and oppressive government is needed. For Berlin, there is a strong connection between a negative view of human nature, the justification of "the terror of authority" (CTH: 118) and, as a result, illiberal and undemocratic forms of government. The malignity of human nature should therefore not be exaggerated, otherwise a liberal society is not possible. A liberal society must presuppose that human beings are able to recognise the moral validity "of some absolute barriers to the imposition of one man's will on another" (FEL: 166; L: 211). If human beings, due to their evilness or malignity, are unable to control their bad will, there cannot be much freedom in society. A liberal society can exist only if a majority of citizens share basic moral rules.[46]

This optimism with regard to human nature does not mean that Berlin is blind to the malice that has occurred and is still taking place. Under the influence of wrong concepts and categories human beings are capable of committing the most unspeakable crimes. In his old age Berlin seems to have become more pessimistic. In 1991, for instance, Berlin paints a rather dark scenario when confronted with the nationalist violence in former Yugoslavia. It is as if he foresaw the genocide that would take place only a few years later in that region:

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[46] Another reason why Berlin had to reject the notion of innate evil was to avoid a too pessimistic view of human life. The moral universe is not only non-harmonious but also occupied by malicious people. This is the picture drawn by John Gray in his *Straw Dogs* (2002). This political philosopher, who in 1995 wrote a well-received introduction to Berlin's thought, combines value pluralist insights with a rather gloomy view of human nature. In such a double tragic situation there is little hope that value conflicts will ever be resolved in a decent way or that the destruction of the human world due to competing ideologies can be averted.

> At eighty-two, I've lived through virtually the entire century, the worst century that Europe has ever had. In my life, more dreadful things occurred than at any other time in history. Worse, I suspect, even than the days of the Huns. One can only hope that after the various peoples get exhausted from fighting, the bloody tide will subside. Unless tourniquets can be applied to stop the haemorrhaging, and bandages to the wounds so that they can slowly heal, even if they leave scars, we're in for the continuation of a very bad time. (Gardels 1991: 22)

This rather gloomy view of human nature seems to contradict Berlin's own warning not to exaggerate human malignity.

This brings us to the intellectual dilemma Berlin faced: How can he safeguard the foundations of a liberal and open society, which requires trust in human nature, and at the same time be intellectually honest and not close his eyes to the darker aspects of human nature? To see how Berlin deals with this dilemma, we will first look closely at how Berlin responded to the Holocaust.

The Holocaust and Radical Evil

What is Berlin's post-war thinking with regard to the evil that took place during the Holocaust? We can form a better idea of this if we examine Berlin's reaction to Hannah Arendt's notion of "the banality of evil." In 1961 both Berlin and Arendt followed the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. Earlier, in 1951, Arendt had published *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in an effort to understand the radical evil that had occurred during the Holocaust. She concluded that the nature of that evil was radical in the sense that it could no longer be deduced from humanly comprehensible and sinful motives such as selfishness or even sadism and bestiality. In an organised and systematic way the SS deprived human beings of their morality, their dignity, their individuality, their "natality" and "spontaneity" (the human capacity to initiate), and were made "superfluous." Eichmann showed Arendt another aspect of evil, namely genocide committed by petty, loyal and conscious civilians sitting behind desks. For this aspect of evil she devised the term "the banality of evil" to indicate

> the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness. (Arendt 1971: 417)

Berlin's reaction to Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil" was as follows: "I am not ready to swallow her idea about the banality of evil. I think it is false. The Nazis were not 'banal'. Eichmann deeply believed in what he did, it was, he admitted, at the centre of his being" (Jahanbegloo 1992: 84). In this quote Berlin clearly rejects the idea that the evil caused by Eichmann could not be traced back to his ideological convictions. For Berlin, Eichmann believed deeply in what he did and he acted in accordance with the values and ends he had previously adopted and chosen. Whilst many of Berlin's (Jewish) contemporaries were worried that Arendt's idea of the "banality of evil" would "normalise" the unspeakable crimes of the Holocaust, Berlin was concerned particularly with safeguarding Eichmann's rationality. He refuses to classify Eichmann or the Nazis as mad people whose acts were insane and therefore incomprehensible (Lukes 1998: 114). Eichmann acted "rationally" within Nazi concepts and categories. What could be the reason for this insistence on rationality?

Before answering that question, we first have to go back to the distinction Berlin made between "sane people" and "moral idiots" (see chapter 6.4), as those whose acts are respectively comprehensible or beyond comprehension. The easy conclusion that could be drawn from this rather simple distinction is that moral idiots commit inhuman acts that are beyond comprehension and that sane people commit acts that are in principle comprehensible. But Berlin's distinction is more complicated. Eichmann was not mad, yet his acts were inhuman. For Berlin, inhuman acts need not be beyond comprehension. We may feel moral abhorrence at what Eichmann or other Nazis did, but we can still make an effort to understand it. Berlin makes a clear distinction between condemning and understanding. Under the influence of perverted concepts and categories sane human beings can commit inhuman acts. Although the acts themselves fall outside the frontiers of humanity and make us morally disgusted, they need not be beyond comprehension. We can always make an effort to understand the concepts and categories and the reasons and intentions behind them. Berlin remained remarkably consistent on this point throughout his life. In one of his last essays, "My Intellectual Path" (1996), he writes:

> I find Nazi values detestable, but I can understand how, given enough misinformation, enough false belief about reality, one could come to believe that they are the only salvation. Of course they have to be fought, by war if need be, but I do not regard the Nazis, as some people do, as literally pathological or insane, only as wickedly wrong, to-

> tally misguided about the facts, for example in believing that some beings are subhuman, or that race is central, or that Nordic races alone are truly creative, and so forth. I see how, with enough false education, enough widespread illusion and error, men can, while remaining men, believe this and commit the most unspeakable crimes. (POI: 12-13)

Also in his interview with Steven Lukes at the end of his life Berlin holds on to the idea that the Nazis were not mad. The Nazis were evil and misguided by false conceptions of human nature but not mad:

> Supposing that you believe that there are creatures describable as subhuman, *Untermenschen*, and they have certain attributes, and in virtue of these attributes they bore into your culture like termites, and destroy everything you value and respect and love, particularly the German qualities of the German people. Then it will follow that these people must somehow be eliminated from your system, either by emigration—being pushed out, or, if that's not feasible, by murder. (Lukes 1998: 114)

Berlin thus wants to hold on to the idea that the Holocaust is humanly understandable. Berlin deviates here from post-Auschwitz[47] notions of radical evil that exclude ideological motives as reasons for the horror. He wants, however, to hold on to the idea that the Holocaust is comprehensible and that we can trace the ideological motives and concepts and categories that caused these inhuman acts.

We can now turn to the reason why Berlin wants to hold on to the idea that the Holocaust is comprehensible. If the cause of even the most terrible evil that has ever happened can be traced back to the power of ideas, to a false ideology, it is also possible to do something about it. Ideology distorts the basic moral concepts and categories people have "naturally" and can motivate them to commit the most unspeakable crimes. We have seen Berlin's belief in the soteriological

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[47] After Auschwitz the Kantian notion of radical evil was not considered to be very useful in explaining the evil that occurred in the death camps. According to Richard J. Bernstein in his *Radical Evil* (2002), Kant used too narrow a range of incentives to explain the lack of willingness to conform to the moral law. He was especially concerned with non-moral incentives that arise from our natural inclinations and desires that he at times categorises under the rubric of self-love or selfishness. To explain the horrors of the twentieth century a wider variety of explanations is needed.

and therapeutic function of philosophy to correct wrong ideas (chapter 5.2). In this way the foundations of a liberal and open society can remain intact. There are indeed very dark aspects within human nature, but these can be cured.

Berlin thus deviates from the post Auschwitz notion of radical evil that makes this evil incomprehensible. He cannot accept any explanation that denies the influence of ideology such as can be found in the post-Auschwitz notion of radical evil and Hannah Arendt's notion of "the banality of evil." By maintaining that even Nazis like Eichmann were rational, Berlin claims that human beings are in general not pathologically mad or innately evil. They can simply be "wickedly wrong" (POI: 12, 13) due to indoctrination with a perverted ideology. Misguided human beings, however, can be changed into tolerant liberal democrats. This change may not be possible for fanatics and bigots, but Berlin believes that the concepts and categories by which "ordinary" people think can be changed and improved.

Another reason for not accepting the incomprehensibility thesis in reflections on the Holocaust is that it conflicts with Berlin's own belief in the existence of a common human nature. Berlin holds on to the possibility of understanding otherness and intercommunication, even when dealing with Nazis. We could deny that we share a common humanity with these monsters, but we would then fall into the same trap the Nazis and communists did when they denied a common human nature to the Jews and capitalists. The consequences of the denial of a common human nature were, according to Berlin, disastrous in the twentieth century:

> The Fascists and National Socialists did not expect inferior classes, or races, or individuals to understand or sympathise with their own goals, their inferiority was innate, ineradicable, since it was due to blood, or race, or some other irremovable characteristic; any attempt on the part of such creatures to pretend to equality with their masters, or even to comprehension of their ideals, was regarded as arrogant and presumptuous. (CTH: 176)

The fascists denied sharing a common human nature with the Jews and considered it useless to communicate with them. The same applied to (Soviet) Marxism. In theory Marxism is founded on reason, but in practice the theory of an economic base and ideological superstructure divides human beings into classes. The beliefs of people in these classes reflect their interests. It is considered useless to con-

vince the members of the fallen order (capitalists) that the only way in which they could save themselves was by understanding the necessities of history. They are members of a doomed class, conditioned to see everything through a falsifying lens (CTH: 178). Just like fascism, Marxism denies that there is a common human nature and communication with "others" is regarded as useless. For Berlin, this denial of a common human nature is one of the main causes of evil during the twentieth century.

As a historian of ideas, Berlin saw that that the idea of a common human nature, especially under the influence of the Romantics and nihilists such as Nietzsche, has been questioned since the nineteenth century. Until that time belief in a common humanity was "a premise upon which all previous humanism, religious and secular, had stood" (CTH: 179). For instance, under the influence of Kant the most important common characteristic was considered to be "the possession of a faculty called reason, which enabled its possessor to perceive the truth, both theoretical and practical. The truth, it was assumed, was equally visible to all rational minds everywhere" (CTH: 175-76). Berlin did not adopt this Kantian anthropology but shared with Kant and other humanists the belief in a common human nature, although on other grounds, as we have seen in chapters 5 and 6.

Within the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths, Berlin also finds a general belief in a common human nature. This makes quite a difference as to how the possibility of communication is judged:

> However bitter the hatreds between Christians, Jews and Muslims, or between different sects within these faiths, the argument for the extermination of heretics always rested on the truth, which was one and universal, that is, visible to all; that only a few individuals were lost beyond redemption, being too blinded and perverted to be saved by anything but the suffering of death. This rests on the assumption that men, as such, have a common nature, which makes communication in principle always possible and therefore always morally obligatory. (CTH: 179)

In Nazi Germany and in the Soviet Union a division of humankind occurred. For Berlin, this was something new in history. It was the division between true human beings and some other, lower order of beings, inferior races, inferior cultures, subhuman creatures, nations or classes condemned by history (CTH: 179). This new attitude permitted humans "to look on many millions of their fellow men as not

quite human, to slaughter them without a qualm of conscience, without the need to try to save them or warn them" (CTH: 180).

Berlin's belief in a common human nature is the premise on which his humanism stands. This foundation is difficult to combine with the post-Auschwitz notion of radical evil that recognises a kind of evil that is beyond comprehension. This post-Auschwitz notion of radical evil (connected with Hannah Arendt) is deeply embedded in continental hermeneutics (Gadamer and Heidegger), in which it is recognised that our imagination and ability of *Verstehen* are limited. The gap between the interpreter and what is interpreted is too wide. The differences in the horizons of understanding can never be bridged and therefore the possibility of the incommensurability of languages is clearly present. We have seen in chapter 5 that Berlin did not adopt these continental hermeneutical starting points and remained faithful to his belief (inspired by Vico and Herder) in a common human nature, including the possibility of understanding otherness if we use our faculty of imagination. The question could be raised as to whether, in the case of the Holocaust, Berlin's notion of *Verstehen* is not too optimistic. Can we really enter into the minds of Hitler or the Nazis in the camps?

Criticism of this notion of a common human nature also comes from Berlin's biographer Michael Ignatieff. For him there remains a wide gap in Berlin's work "between understanding the Romantic preconditions of fascist belief and understanding why these could produce practices of murder and extermination" (Ignatieff in: Margalit 1991: 145). Berlin does not explain how people endowed with a common human nature could be so susceptible to anti-humanist indoctrination such as the view that Jews do not belong to the same human family (Margalit 1991: 144). In Ignatieff's view, this gap could be overcome if Berlin's account of human nature included notions of human beings as innately evil and as naturally violent, but these aspects are missing. Ignatieff is pointing here to a difficulty that is present not only in Berlin's thought but in many humanists as well. Berlin explains evil through the use of wrong concepts of categories but does not explain why certain human beings take the initiative in perverting them and indoctrinating others. We are dealing here with a *theodicy* type of philosophical problem. Just as Christianity has always found it difficult to explain God's goodness in combination with divine omnipotence in a world full of evil, so many humanists, like Berlin, have difficulty with combining the belief in a common *humanum* with the

intentional indoctrination of anti-humanist ideas that leads to genocide and other forms of evil.

Berlin thus holds on to his belief in a common human nature, including the presence of a basic morality and the possibility of understanding otherness. He does not want to exclude *a priori* the possibility of understanding one another. That would not only place in question the "soteriological" power of philosophy and thereby the possibility of improving the human condition (see chapter 5.2), it would also limit the possibility of intercommunication and dialogue. For Berlin, it always remains reasonable for human beings to attempt to communicate with and to try to persuade one another of the truth of what they believe.

A peaceful liberal and pluralist society is not possible if human beings are deemed to be innately evil, violent, intolerant and incapable of making compromises when value conflicts occur. To safeguard the foundations of a liberal society, Berlin must leave specific aspects of (radical) evil untouched, the kind of evil that, according to Hannah Arendt, cannot be understood by the imagination.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter we have witnessed Berlin's complex thinking on evil. Human beings are endowed with a basic morality, but under the influence of wrong concepts and categories they can act against it. Berlin is realistic enough to know that human beings can become wolves who eat the sheep or pikes who swallow the minnows, but he is reluctant to characterise human beings as innately evil or radically evil. There must also be faith in the positive aspects in human nature, otherwise a free, open and democratic society is impossible. In that case no negative liberty would be allowed for humans to make their own choices in value conflicts. An additional reason why Berlin must keep believing in human ability is his belief in the non-harmonious nature of our moral universe in which value conflicts have to be resolved. If in such a world there are only innately evil people, the human situation would have no possibilities for improvement. Therefore, Berlin makes grateful use of the Kantian notion of "the crooked timber of humanity" to deal with both the inner tensions and the positive and negative aspects within human nature.

The Second World War challenged any optimism with regard to human nature. Nazi Germany deliberately exchanged what was held as the basic morality for an opposite set of values. Yet the Holocaust

did not put an end to Berlin's belief in the presence of a basic morality. Its denial and deliberate attempt to destroy it made it even stronger in post-war times. Being confronted with the terrible consequences of the denial of a basic morality, human beings were more aware of its existence. From a postmodern or conventionalist perspective it could be argued that Berlin is too optimistic about the existence of a basic morality and that he confuses the Western inheritance of the natural law tradition with the presence of a universal basic law.

For Hannah Arendt, there is radical evil beyond understanding. But Berlin holds on to his belief that we can always, through imaginative skills, discern the motives and ends behind acts, even the most appalling ones. Also, there is a common human nature which always makes it possible to communicate with one another: "Intercommunication between cultures in time and space is only possible because what makes men human is common to them, and acts as a bridge between them" (CTH: 11). For Berlin it is crucial to remain in communication with one's greatest enemies, even when they have committed the most unspeakable acts. However morally despicable, behind their deeds are "values" and ends that other (fellow) human beings can recognise. Only if this is not at all possible can we speak of insanity and moral idiots. This conclusion, however, must be deferred as long as possible to avoid the situation that our enemies are labelled as non-humans who can be exterminated like beasts.

In this chapter we have also seen that Berlin's value pluralism, in combination with his humanism, is a *Weltanschauung*. It is a worldview with a trust in human capabilities and a (soteriological) hope that evil can be conquered. Like religions, it contains a diagnosis of the human predicament and a solution as to how it can be overcome (Smith 1994: 10). In 1990, just after the fall of the Soviet Union, we see a hopeful Berlin who writes in his essay "The Survival of the Russian Intelligentsia:"

> The Russians are a great people, their creative powers are immense, and once they are set free there is no telling what they may give to the world. A new barbarism is always possible, but I see little prospect of it at present. That evils can, after all, be conquered, that the end of enslavement is in progress, are things of which men can be reasonably proud. (TSM: 169).

CHAPTER 8

Summaries and Conclusions

In this final chapter I will give three summaries from three different angles. In the first summary the essential elements of Berlin's anthropology will be listed. The second summary will recapitulate the running thread of this study, namely if and how Berlin manages to reconcile his commitment to both universality and particularity. Because my aim of this study has also been to introduce Berlin to the philosophy of religion, in the final section I will also give an overview of the humanist strands of Berlin's thought and indicate where he deviates from humanism. Can Berlin's commitment to diversity withstand the challenges of today's more radical pluralistic world than when Berlin was writing?

8.1 BERLIN'S ANTHROPOLOGY

The first aim of this study has been to unveil the foundation of value pluralism, of which Berlin is regarded as the founding father, in philosophical anthropology. Berlin did not leave behind a systematic anthropology, but his views with regard to human nature and the meaning of life have to be derived from his many essays. In order to do justice to diversity and liberty, in his anthropology Berlin seeks to avoid an essentialism that squeezes human beings into fixed patterns of behaviour. He defines only a limited number of characteristics of the human condition that do not presuppose any higher goals toward which a human life should be directed

- *Non-Harmonious Moral Universe*
  The ontological truth claim that Berlin makes with regard to the moral universe that surrounds human beings is that it is non-harmonious (chapters 1 and 2). Berlin claims that values and ends which, within a given moral framework, are considered to be good and worthwhile to pursue are not always compatible and can even be in conflict with one another. The moral depth structure is antagonistic. There are different moralities that clash. Pluralism leads to incommensurability. For Berlin this means that there is no universally shared standard available that can decide between competing values and value systems. Choices (or compromises) between these

values and ends always entail sacrifice or pain. Something that has been considered to be good has to be given up. In the case of a compromise a value can be only partially realised. Therefore, Berlin characterises the moral universe as non-harmonious and even tragic. Value conflicts occur unintentionally and it is not always possible to avoid them.

- *Internal Conflicts: Crooked Timber*
  Conflicts between values and ends also take place in personal life, within the breast of an individual. There are dilemmas to resolve, sometimes of a tragic nature. Whatever one chooses, the consequences are bad. The different roles in life (businesswoman, mother, wife) require different ends that are pursued and these can conflict with one another. The ambiguities and incompatibilities in life cannot be straightened out beforehand. For Berlin there is no God that secures order behind the apparent chaos. Also, there is no higher end or purpose in life that can provide the necessary unity. This internal crookedness is also part of the human condition. Inspired by Kant, Berlin compares human beings with "crooked timber" from which nothing straight can be made.

- *The Ability to Resolve Value conflicts*
  As a historian of ideas, Berlin did not offer his readers an elaborate moral or political philosophy of how to deal with (private and social) value conflicts, as can be found in his friends Stuart Hampshire, Bernard Williams and John Rawls. Nonetheless, his view of human nature does provide the basic contours of such a philosophy.

  Berlin has confidence in the human ability to resolve their internal or personal value conflicts. It is important for him that these conflicts are resolved in a rational and non-arbitrary way. The absence of shared standards of assessment raises doubt whether rationality in the sense of non-arbitrariness is possible. Either decision seems to be equally valid. For Berlin, rationality can still be secured when the choices are consistent and coherent with personal life plans. A point of criticism I have made is that, despite Berlin's awareness of ambiguity and crookedness within human nature, he assumes that there can be coherence and consistency in personal plans. I have noticed a holistic tendency in his thoughts. His value pluralism that gives rise to a much more fragmented view of the

self, leading to ambiguity, incoherence and inconsistency in personal life plans, which makes it difficult to use them as criterion for rationality.

- *Political Consequences: a Decent Society*
Berlin's truth claim with regard to the non-harmonious and tragic nature of the moral universe has political consequences first of all (chapter 2). Berlin deems the pursuit of perfection, in the sense that all good values and ends can be harmoniously combined, as senseless. Within the good there can be conflicts between worthwhile yet incompatible values and ends. Difficult either/or choices or compromises have to be made which lead inevitably to sacrifice, pain and disappointment. Instead of seeking perfection, governments should try simply to be decent. Decent governments should not impose a specific vision of the good on their citizens but allow a certain area of discretion in which personal choices can be made. Decent governments should comply minimally with basic morality and be aware of the perennial and inevitable value conflicts in society. They should try to reduce or share the pain and sacrifice connected with the choices that have to be made.

Berlin is aware that the pursuit of a decent society is not very heroic. The only moral satisfaction that could perhaps be reached in a decent society is by displaying *phronesis* and a sense of reality in dealing with inevitable conflicts. This wisdom is, however, not always recognised by the media and general public who, due to the unconscious and persistent belief in a harmonious moral order, often a remnant of the Enlightenment faith in progress, still believe that all good values can be combined in society.

Especially from the conservative perspective there has been criticism of the liberal requirement to abandon the common pursuit of a vision of the good. Without a common goal in society, including the necessary *Bildung* in virtues that are necessary to reach that goal, citizens would fall back into a far-reaching individualism and egotism and would be stimulated only by consumption, as Nietzsche once predicted. Berlin would argue that these conservatives close their eyes to the problem that in a pluralist situation not everyone is charmed by an Aristotelian or Thomistic moral framework.

- *No Higher Goal in History*

  Berlin's belief in the non-harmonious and tragic nature of the moral universe also has consequences for how he regards the goal of history. Berlin's own ideas are quite anti-teleological with respect to metaphysical teleology. He rejects the belief in the existence of a higher goal within history that leads to the realisation of perfection on earth.

  Berlin's anti-teleological and non-perfectionalist ideas do not entail that societies should stop improving the living conditions of their citizens and not seek to develop themselves any further. Improvements are still possible in Berlin's value pluralism: not by utopian blueprints but step by step, by a "piecemeal engineering" that deals seriously with the value conflicts that we are bound to encounter when we try to realise improvements. Perfect results, however, cannot be expected and people who feel that their precious goals are not sufficiently realised will feel discontent. Yet the pain can be compensated for or divided.

- *Community-Based Goals*

  To reach positive community-based goals, it is possible, in Berlin's view, to sacrifice some of the negative liberty of citizens. Due to his value pluralist insights, Berlin realises that liberty cannot always be the highest goal and that it can be traded off to realise other goals in society. This sacrifice, however, has its limits and a certain area of negative liberty (Berlin does not precisely indicate what this is) should always be respected. We are bound to trespass on this area if that common goal is to reach a perfect society or human fulfilment. So Berlin's anti-teleology does not exclude society or community-based goals, it only limits them. Because Berlin considered himself a historian of ideas and not a political philosopher, he did not provide any (political) guidelines for how such community-based goals can be established. Especially in today's internally diverse and pluralistic societies it is not an easy task to reach even a modest common vision of the good.

- *No Utopian Dream*

  Berlin's views are highly anti-utopian. His critical message to worldviews that seek perfect societies on earth is that they should give up that pursuit. It is not only a pointless *telos* but also a dangerous one. History has taught that this kind of utopian dreaming

not only shows disrespect for the diversity of other visions of the good but has also served to justify totalitarianism. Contemporary environmentalists, with Richard Rorty as an unexpected ally, argue that, without the dream of an ecotopia, the ecological problems our earth is facing cannot be resolved. A piecemeal approach may turn out to be too gradual and too slow. Berlin would fear the eco-dictatorship and totalitarianism that is usually the result of utopianism.

- *The Power of Choice*

One aspect of the essence that Berlin (despite his anti-essentialism) defines within human nature is the power of choice (chapter 3). For Berlin, creatures cannot be called humans if the area of discretion and personal choice becomes too limited. Berlin is therefore strongly committed to protecting and respecting this power of choice.

Berlin's thought reflects the influence of French existentialism. He shares Jean-Paul Sartre's emphasis on freedom. He also adopts the existentialist view that the power of choice can be experienced as a burden. We sometimes have to make choices in difficult dilemmas that we would rather avoid. We are doomed to choose.

Berlin also shares with the existentialists the notion that human beings are not socially determined, even though he is also aware that human beings can be strongly shaped by their social environments. The reason that Berlin gives is that if human beings are socially determined it would become impossible to explain innovation and the emergence of ideas that go against the current. Another means by which Berlin defends the innate freedom of human beings is the argument that, if they are determined, it would then become impossible to hold them morally responsible for their actions. Also, our common language of praise and blame would not make sense if human beings are determined.

Berlin realises that in many cultures the value of the power of choice (politically translated into negative liberty) is not seen as very important. Negative liberty is quite easily traded off in order to secure other positive values, such as fulfilment in the religious or ideological sense. The explanation that Berlin gives for this easy sacrifice of negative liberty is the denial of value pluralism and the non-harmonious nature of the moral universe. Once people realise that in value conflicts there are no pre-given answers and that perfection or human fulfilment cannot be reached due to the conflict

within the idea of the good itself, they will cherish the freedom of choice.

- *A Pursuer of Ends*
  Berlin also characterises human beings as pursuers of values and ends (chapter 3). By this term Berlin wants to do justice to the fact that in Western thought, due to the Romantic heritage, modern men and women regard themselves not only as discoverers of pre-given values and ends but also as creators of values. With the term “pursuer” Berlin is able to oscillate between the objective dis-covery and the subjective creation of values. Modern Western people who have gone through the Enlightenment and Romanticism will probably regard themselves as creators of values, whilst from other perspectives their moral frameworks will probably be experienced as pre-given.

- *The Meaning of Life is Life Itself*
  Berlin’s ideas with regard to the meaning of life can be characterised as secular and humanist. Of special influence has been the nineteenth-century Russian thinker Alexander Herzen (chapter 2.4) who expresses the idea that the meaning of life is life itself. There is no higher goal. In the pursuit of personal values and ends human beings can find meaning in their lives. Berlin avoids the term “meaning of life” as he finds its connotation too teleological. He prefers to speak of experiencing good moments that make life worthwhile. Berlin realises that it may be hard for people to accept that there is no higher goal in history. He sees the communist utopian zeal as a dangerous alternative to the emptiness that secularism has left behind. Berlin is confident that modern human beings will be able to overcome their “immature” need for a higher goal in life and find meaning in their personal lives. This optimism contrasts with Nietzsche who is more pessimistic with regard to the outcome of the nihilist crisis.

- *Communal Groups and Identity Formation*
  One of the basic needs Berlin recognises in human nature is the need to belong to a communal group and to be recognised (chapter 4). Under the influence of Herder, Berlin is convinced that only within a group in which language and traditions are commonly shared can the spiritual and artistic capacities of its members be

properly expressed. Only in such groups can people truly understand one another.

From postmodern and cosmopolitan perspectives, this view is challenged on the basis that many persons manage to construct their identities without groups based on ethnic and religious origin. They are able to form (global) networks and groups based on shared interest.

An inconsistency in Berlin's thought that I have traced with the help of Seyla Benhabib is that, with regard to identity formation, Berlin takes a rather holistic position with regard to cultural groups or communities. In Berlin's social view of the self, human beings need clearly defined cultures to form healthy identities, whilst as a value pluralist Berlin emphasises the open character of cultures, including their inner tensions. The reason for this holistic fallacy in Berlin's thought is found in Berlin's Zionism, which refers to Herder to justify the desire for a homeland for the Jews *in diaspora.* Only in a homeland could Jewish identity be properly formed. Berlin's Zionist commitment may have blinded him to the intercommunication with other cultures and the fragmenting consequences of his own value pluralist thesis. Within cultures there are many subcultures, each with its own moral framework, which are not always compatible and commensurable with one another. The formation of identity within a culture is therefore not as harmonious as Berlin assumes.

- *Understanding "Otherness"*

  It belongs to being human that we are able to understand other cultures (chapter 5). In his value pluralist epistemology Berlin uses a constructivism that is inspired by Kant but understands it historically. Despite all our cultural differences, we share a number of permanent and semi-permanent concepts and categories that enable common understanding. Furthermore, from Vico and Herder Berlin learned that we are endowed with an imaginative reconstructive capacity that enables us to enter into past and strange cultures, even if, on the basis of our moral standards, we abhor them. For Berlin there is no incommensurability of languages or cultures (his "soft" incommensurability thesis is restricted to the absence of a higher yardstick for resolving value conflicts that result from pluralism). Cultures are not closed entities for Berlin. We share a common humanity, even with our enemies. There is always some basis for un-

derstanding as all human beings are pursuers of values and ends. These values and ends can be recognised, even though we may not share them or find them morally disgusting.

Further understanding can be reached with the help of a hermeneutical method that Berlin developed in isolation from post-war continental hermeneutical developments. Like his continental counterparts, Berlin accepts that our observations are always value-laden and that self-reflection is necessary. Yet Berlin is more optimistic, holding that we can escape our own situation and context.

- *Endowed with a Basic Morality*

Human beings are endowed with a basic morality (chapter 6). Berlin grounds this basic morality in the human condition of being vulnerable and in need of social regulation in order to survive. Examples of basic morality are rules against wanton killing and torture, guaranteeing fair trials, not requiring children to denounce their parents or friends to betray one another, forbidding soldiers to use methods of barbarism, etc.

Berlin also recognises a historical process in which moral views, whether basic or particular, have been crystallised in language and thought. Inspired by the natural law tradition, Berlin deems human beings able to distinguish between the level of basic morality and the conventional level and between universality and particularity. He regards basic morality as universal and absolute. At the same time he recognises cultural diversity at the conventional level. In this way he can, as an outsider, judge and condemn other cultures that break basic principles and at the same time respect cultural diversity.

From a conventionalist perspective (such as that expressed by Alasdair MacIntyre) serious doubts have been raised against the idea that there are moral and epistemological universals. People do not always make a distinction between basic morality and morality to support a specific way of life. What is regarded as basic morality is usually the product of one's own (often Western) tradition.

- *Understanding Evil*

Berlin recognises intentional evil and explains it as a result of the application of "wrong" concepts and categories (chapter 7). He avoids notions such as innate evil. Berlin also wants to hold on to the idea that all evil is comprehensible, unless committed by some-

one who is truly insane. The Nazis were not mad but under the influence of wrong concepts and categories. Their unspeakable crimes can therefore be understood. Berlin makes a clear distinction between understanding and condemning. While disapproving morally, it is still possible to make an effort to understand. With the help of philosophy wrong concepts and categories can be changed. Berlin leaves the question unanswered as to why persons decide intentionally to distort concepts and categories and indoctrinate people in a way that opens the door for the most unspeakable crimes. He avoids the question of whether there is innate evil in human nature. From the perspective of continental hermeneutics, there is the possibility that there are real moral strangers among us that we cannot understand. Our ability to bridge differences and understand otherness (cross-cultural and trans-historical understanding) is limited. There is even the notion of radical evil, which refers to evil actions that are incomprehensible. For Berlin, who trusts in our ability of *Verstehen*, it is important to postpone the moment that we call evil insane and incomprehensible as long as possible. With the help of philosophy we can always make an effort to convince "evil" people that the concepts and categories they are using are wrong. For strategic (liberal) reasons Berlin does not want to exaggerate the human propensity to do evil: a free and open society could in that case not be entrusted to citizens.

8.2 COMMITMENT TO BOTH UNIVERSALITY AND PARTICULARITY

The thread running throughout this book has been to see how Berlin reconciles his commitments to both universality and particularity/diversity and to show the difference between value pluralism and relativism. Berlin's value pluralism, in particular his incommensurability thesis, could easily lead to relativist conclusions. In this section I will summarise how Berlin, as a value pluralist, combats relativism and how he struggles to satisfy his commitments to both universality and diversity.

- *Shaped but not Determined*
  Berlin realises that to guarantee universal values it is necessary that human beings not be defined as totally enclosed within their communities. They should be able to reflect critically on what has been pre-given. But to guarantee cultural diversity, it is also important to recognise the social aspects of human nature. With regard to the

place human beings hold in their communities (chapter 4.1), Berlin defines human beings neither as fully autonomous nor as socially determined. He recognises that human identities are shaped by their communities, yet human beings can be critical of the values and ends that have been inherited and change them if necessary.

- *Social Cohesion and Cultural Belonging*
  We also see that Berlin seeks to avoid an either/or decision in the value conflict between "cultural belonging" and "social cohesion." At the end of his life, this value conflict emerged in today's Western multicultural societies. In the multicultural politics of the 1980s and early 1990s much emphasis was put on "cultural belonging" (out of the commitment to protect diversity), but this has led to serious problems with regard to social cohesion. The new immigrants also have to live and work with a largely secularised and individualised original population. Berlin's solution to this problem is an umbrella of political and economic unity in which universal values are guaranteed and under which cultural diversity can be accommodated (a variant of the so-called diversity-within-unity model) (see chapter 4.5). He cannot therefore avoid the necessity of a certain assimilation and integration into the dominant society. Berlin even agrees that in the political domain the door must be closed to the fanatical particularism of fundamentalists, as they are unable to make the necessary compromises and trade-offs and impose their will on others by violent means. Berlin rejects, however, the universalist tendencies of the liberal-cosmopolitan alternative that seeks detachment from one's cultural, ethnic or religious roots in order to become a citizen of the world.

- *Two Concepts of Morality*
  To safeguard both universal and particular values, human beings should primarily have the ability to recognise the difference between what belongs to the basic moral requirements to survive (what has also been called the natural law) and man-made law (see chapter 6.1). With this ability people can relate their own moral framework to those of others and can make a distinction between what is particular and what is universal.

  Thus Berlin thinks that people are able to make a distinction between basic morality and morality to uphold a specific way of life. This assumption enables Berlin to separate values and ends that are

required to protect basic human life at the natural level from the ones at the conventional level that refer to a specific vision of the good life. Berlin claims universality and absoluteness only for the first type of values, which include basic rules against genocide, torture, unfair trails and the denial of a basic power of choice. Once these requirements are met, diversity can be allowed with regard to values at the conventional level. In this way Berlin seeks to reconcile his commitment to both universality and particularity. He avoids moral relativism by securing basic rules and at the same time is able to do justice to cultural and moral diversity.

From a conventionalist perspective (often held by communitarians), the common possession of moral and epistemological universals, including the ability to distinguish between basic morality and morality to support a specific way of life is seriously doubted. For these conventionalists (who usually hold a situated view of human nature and regard cultures as closed paradigms) all Berlin's assumptions are simply philosophical constructs that are imposed on other cultures on the basis of his Western liberal tradition. In their view, therefore, Berlin is not truly doing justice to diversity.

- *A Non-Essentialist and Non-Teleological Foundationalism*
  From a postmodernist perspective it could be argued that Berlin, as an early critic of modernism, could not avoid resorting to a modest form of foundationalism in order to secure the universality of a basic morality. He grounds the presence of a basic morality in the basic needs and requirements of human beings. Human beings are vulnerable creatures who desire to continue in their existence and need a safe environment to nurture their children. To enable social life and to prevent life from becoming short, lonely, nasty and brutish they need basic rules. One of the general drawbacks of foundationalism is that, due to its universalist claims, cultural diversity is not always respected. Berlin avoids this by not including any essentialist or teleological views (in the metaphysical sense) about the place of human beings and how they should behave (see chapter 6.1).

- *Limitation of Incommensurability*

  This modest foundationalism, however, is not the only price Berlin has to pay. For his reconciliation of his commitment to both universality and particularity, Berlin also has to compromise his own incommensurability thesis, which states that there is no commonly shared higher value available to decide which of the conflicting values should have priority. The distinction between a morality to support basic human necessities and morality to support a specific way of life, however, provides such a standard. Respect for basic morality is considered to be of more importance than the requirements at the conventional level. This standard, however, does not do away completely with Berlin's incommensurability thesis. There are still value conflicts that can take place at "the same level" (either at the basic or at the conventional level) for which no answers are pre-given. For instance, within the human rights doctrine, it still remains difficult to resolve the conflict between the freedom of religion and the freedom not to be sexually discriminated against (see concluding remarks chapter 6).

- *Transcendence of Man-Made Values*

  In contrast to religiously inspired axiologies, the source of values is, for Berlin, secular, human and plural. There is no transcendent realm or God to guarantee universality or absoluteness of our evaluative frameworks. Berlin, however, finds a non-religious way to "transcend" values merely on the basis of the fact that they are human artefacts. In history certain rules and values manage to survive and crystallise in our traditions and in the way we think and act. Generations of people recognised the worth of these values and rules and through time they have endorsed and "sanctified" them. In the Western history of ideas this morality has become part of the *philosophia perennis.* This means that values belonging to it can no longer be regarded as a matter of personal acceptance or rejection. When values and rules have become part of the *philosophia perennis* they are more than just an intersubjective or particularist standard and can be considered as absolute.

  With the help of the "sanctifying" or "transcending" powers of tradition (or the *philosophia perennis*) Berlin also seeks to secure values such as respect for privacy and a certain area of discretion where individual choices can be made. Strictly speaking, these val-

ues are not needed for basic survival, yet denying them would detract from the quality and meaning of human life (see chapter 6.2).

- *Ontology*
  Berlin combines a subjectivist epistemology with a realist ontology. His Kantian inspired but historically understood constructivist epistemology could easily give rise to a non-realist ontology. the disadvantage of that position is that there would be no "mind-independent" reality that could offer resistance when our accounts of reality have been distorted by "wrong" concepts and categories. In that case "anything goes" and Berlin could no longer hold on to universalism. His epistemology, however, is subjectivist. We can never be fully certain of our knowledge of this reality and therefore the task of philosophy is to reflect critically on our concepts and categories and to change them when there are signs that they distort reality or lead to unnecessary suffering. Berlin uses coherentist, pragmatist and negative utilitarian criteria to establish that (see chapter 5.2).

  With respect to morality, we have seen that Berlin osciliates between a realist and subjectivist ontologly, although he is aware of the incompatiblity of both 'objective discovery' (the realist position) and 'subjective creation' (the subjectivist position) (Jahanbegloo 1992: 159). With regard to values that are needed to protect basic natural needs, Berlin is a realist. These values are independent of human construction as they are in a sense pre-given by nature. But for most of the other values, especially the ones that are needed to uphold a tradition, Berlin holds a more subjectivist ontology. These values are culture-bound and the result of human construction. The main advantage of this ontological position is that it explains moral diversity and moral change. The disadvantage is that it could lead to moral relativism, and the development of what Berlin calls 'the untrammelled will'. I have argued that a radical subjectivist position is also inconsistent with his value pluralist thesis. Value conflicts, in fact, become inconceivable as the individual subject could decide to abandon values that conflict and cause pain..

  The way Berlin seeks to reduce (radical) subjectivism is by reference to the traditions and communities to which human beings always belong. Particularly with regard to Western society, Berlin also refers to the *philosophia perennis,* the tradition of the lasting

ideas of the Jewish, Greek, Christian and Humanist traditions. In this way subjectivism he can avoid subjectivism and both diachronic and synchronic judgement (at least in Western culture) becomes possible. The criticism I have raised is that the *philosophia perennis* as a source of objective values is restricted to Western culture. Furthermore the *philosophia perennis* as a source of objective values is based on the present belief that these values are real and pre-given, either by God or by nature. Once people realise that our values and norms are just a construct of Western thought, motivational problems arise with regard to abiding these rules. Berlin, however, is confident that human beings can become mature in the moral (and existential) sense and that they will still remain faithful with regard to the self-created norms and values.

- *Rationality without Commensurability*

  The absence of a universally valid yardstick or highest value to which we can refer to justify our choices raises doubts with regard to the possibility of reasoned value judgements. Berlin detaches the rational resolution of conflicts from the requirement of commensurability. Rationality does not mean compliance to absolute proof or a universally valid standard but consistency and coherence with regard to one's personal life or the moral framework of one's community. Problematic in this solution is that it only allows for judgement within a culture and not between cultures and that it is therefore particularist in nature. Another problem is the tacit holistic assumption with regard to the concept of the self and culture. The criteria of consistency and coherence make sense only if lives and cultures form a unity, a whole. Berlin's value pluralism gives rise to a much more fragmented view of the self, of lives and of cultures.

  This holistic tendency is also present in Berlin's views of the formation of a healthy identity, which, in his view, can take place only within a close community. An important drawback connected with this holistic tendency in Berlin's view of culture is that it could lead to negation or ignorance of inner tensions within cultures, especially when the values and ends of individuals (women) and subgroups are crushed by the dominant group. The holistic fallacy also produces a certain blindness to the profoundness of conflict within today's pluralist and multicultural societies and therefore too much optimism with regard to the possibility of con-

flict resolution. There is not only conflict between values and value systems but also disagreement about which standard, which concept of justice, which yardstick or which highest value should prevail.

- *Trust in Human Potential*

  In this study we have seen that Berlin combines his convictions with regard to the non-harmonious nature of the moral universe with a quite positive view of human abilities. Human beings are not socially determined and can be critical of what has been pre-given. They have specific moral and intellectual capabilities that enable a basic morality and the capacity to understand "otherness." The belief in a non-harmonious moral universe could just as easily have been combined with a much more situated view of human nature that stresses the imprisonment of humans in their language games. Value pluralism can also be combined with a negative view of human nature, stressing the human tendency to violence or wickedness. When value pluralism is combined with a less positive view of human nature, this would mean a doubly tragic situation. Our universe would not only be non-harmonious but also inhabited by creatures unable to understand one another and unwilling to resolve their conflicts in a decent way: a hopeless situation that justifies an authoritarian totalitarian type of government to settle differences. Berlin, however, holds on to a much more positive view of human nature. Human beings are able to form decent (preferably liberal and open) societies in which they, despite their differences, can live together peacefully.

8.3 Representative and Challenger of Humanism

In this study I have introduced Berlin as a representative of the humanist family. It is a humanism that is coloured by value pluralism and this makes Berlin a critic of and challenger to humanism as well. In this final section I will give an overview of the humanist strands of Berlin's thought and indicate where he deviates from humanism. I will also take up the question of whether Berlin's ideas are able to face the challenges of a world that due to non-Western immigration and individualisation has become "radically" pluralistic.

With regard to views of human nature, the Dutch humanist Joop Tiedeman distinguishes roughly three types of humanists: namely essentialist thinkers, development thinkers and dilemma thinkers (Tiede-

man 2005: 171-72). Berlin certainly does not belong to the essentialists. Human nature is too diverse and complex to reduce it to just one characteristic. Nor is Berlin a development thinker as there is no pre-given goal to which human nature is directed. But to characterise Berlin as a typical humanist dilemma thinker would not be difficult. He is profoundly aware of conflicts within values and ends, of conflicts within human nature, within individuals and between individuals and their communities and between communities. Human life is full of dilemmas in which human beings must constantly find the right choice and the right balance.

Berlin's value pluralism deeply colours his humanism. Value pluralism means for Berlin that there are no pre-given higher values and ends that should be pursued. His rejection of all metaphysical forms of teleology does not mean that life has no meaning. In fact, he embraces more subjective forms of teleology that seek meaning (in the sense of the best moments in life) in the pursuit of personal values and ends.

Due to his value pluralism, Berlin differs from many humanists in his lack of egalitarian zeal. For Berlin, it goes without saying that human beings should be treated equally in the legal and political senses. However, the pursuit of socio-economic equality will result in a value conflict with respect to the liberty of people to pursue their own ends. This value conflict should not be ignored or negated (chapter 1.3).

Berlin's commitment to diversity makes him quite critical of those forms of humanism and secular worldviews that threaten to crush this diversity. After the war Berlin had to fight the secular dream of scientism, in which it was believed that human life can become perfect once we are able to understand the governing laws behind reality. But if reality is pressed into scientific straitjackets, human subjectivity and diversity will be ignored (chapter 5.1 and 5.4). Out of this commitment to diversity Berlin also rejected utopian forms of humanism that, in order to realise an egalitarian society, severely crush the human freedom to be different (chapter 2.1). Berlin also criticised the cosmopolitan type of liberalism and humanism. This predominantly atheist worldview seeks to detach people from their religious and ethnic roots and to make them citizens of the world in the hope that in this way religious and ethnic strife can be avoided (chapter 4.5).

The humanist strand in Berlin's thought is most reflected in the way he defends human dignity and the power of choice. His justification of these highest values in his value pluralism that assumes no higher values is not always precise and clear. Nonetheless, the defence

of human dignity and power of choice functions as a kind of creed. Berlin confesses that, without the power of choice creatures cannot be called human beings (chapter 3.1).

Like most humanists, Berlin regards human nature in the end as free and not biologically, socially or psychologically determined. This belief in the autonomous nature of human beings does not mean that Berlin holds to an individualist type of humanism. He stresses the importance of social needs within human nature. People need to belong to communities in which their identities can be built. Berlin criticises the type of liberalism that ignores this social aspect in human nature (chapter 4.1).

We also see in Berlin's view of human nature a perhaps "typical" humanist trust in the positive powers of human beings, despite his awareness of human wickedness. Human beings can learn from their mistakes. Berlin is hopeful that human beings will be able to overcome the often self-inflicted evil that arises from "wrong" concepts and categories that shape their actions and thought. What remains unexplained in Berlin's thought is a clarification of intentional manipulation and indoctrination of our concepts and categories leading to extreme forms of dehumanisation including a radical type of evil, for which Auschwitz became the model (chapter 7.1 and 7.2).

The trust in human potential is also reflected in Berlin's confidence that, in our diverse and pluralistic world, human beings are able and willing to understand otherness. In post-war continental thought there is also an awareness of untranslatability, radical otherness and a "critical" insight that power and material interests play a role which makes people unwilling to understand others (chapter 5.4).

Most humanists hold a secular and agnostic position with regard to religion, although there are some religious humanists within the humanist family. Berlin does not hold a radical nihilist position, as can be found in Nietzsche and certain postmodern positions. Life is not infinitely meaningless for Berlin nor will the lack of belief in God wipe away our moral horizon. Berlin does not regard our moral frameworks as a product of a weak will to power (slave morality) but as the reflection of the wisdom of generations and traditions before us. Without a God to guarantee the absoluteness and eternity of our values and norms, our evaluative frameworks will still be regarded as authoritative and binding. Berlin is confident that in the moral and existential senses human beings can become "mature" (chapter 2.4 and chapter 6.5).

With regard to Berlin's trust in "existential maturity," we may conclude that in today's Western society this confidence is probably justified. Secular utopianism has lost its spell. Without belief in higher meaning in life or afterlife, secularised Western people manage to find meaning in their personal lives, even though existential crises can occur when worthwhile personal values and ends (including important relationships) can no longer be pursued (see for instance Stoker 1996).

In our times of fading values and norms Berlin's trust in "moral maturity" has become questionable. The reason why Berlin could be so confident is probably that his moral views are grounded in a view of human nature in which the need to belong to a community is assumed as basic. Berlin therefore took a continuous transfer of moral traditions and a willingness to pay attention to communal values for granted. But for today's autonomous individuals the simple question of William Frankena "Why be moral?" has become quite relevant. If there is no afterlife and no God to whom one must justify one's actions and no police or social control, it may be quite prudent for the individual's personal interests to be parasitical on the good behaviour of others and find excuses for him- or herself (chapter 6.4).

Also, Berlin's trust in a continuing motivation to "stand unflinchingly" for one's ideals can be questioned. Berlin was confident that "morally mature" human beings need no longer have the security of a transcendent realm in which our values and ends are secured. But what he did not realise were the negative motivational effects of his own value pluralist insights. The ideals that we pursue inevitably raise conflicts with the values, ends and ideals of others. There are always those who will challenge our good intentions, because they feel that the values and ends they cherish are being attacked. So we can never be fully good; we cannot be angels. (chapter 6.5).

At the end of his life, Berlin was confronted with the cultural differences of non-Western immigrants. A pluralistic situation has arisen that is more radical than in the time when he was most active. This confrontation led to a compromise in his commitment to diversity. As a young man, Berlin resisted assimilation, but peaceful co-existence in a much more radical pluralist society cannot escape a certain integration and assimilation of especially non-Western newcomers. Radical fanatics have to be prevented from imposing their intolerant visions of the good on others. As a historian of ideas, Berlin did not give us a value pluralist political theory to deal with (radically) pluralist societies. But, on the basis of the exclusion of certain radical and

fanatic groups, we can conclude that for Berlin incommensurability is not endless. To resolve our value conflicts, we need shared standards and not all views can be allowed. Somehow they must comply with the criteria of mutual respect, tolerance and peaceful co-existence (chapter 4.5).

This exclusion of radical fanatics from the political domain does not mean the end of dialogue for Berlin. Even with the Nazis, Berlin (as a Jew) wanted to keep the possibility of intercommunication open (chapter 7.2). He holds on to the idea that we share a common human nature. Berlin may be judged as too optimistic about our capacity to understand otherness, but his greatest concern is that when a common humanity is denied, and in its trail the possession of human dignity, the road will be cleared to divide human beings into higher and lower categories. In Auschwitz and the Gulag we have seen the consequences of that idea. Thus, for Berlin, we can and should make an effort to understand the values and ends of others, even of radical fanatics who have committed the most atrocious deeds.

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CTH *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, Princeton University Press, 1990
F&L *The First and the Last*, Granta Books, 1999
FIB *Freedom and its Betrayal*, Princeton University Press, 2002
FEL *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, 1969
L *Liberty*, Oxford University Press, 2002
MARX *Karl Marx, His Life and Environment,* Oxford University Press, (1st edition 1939), 4th edition, 1978
PI *Personal Impressions*, Pimlico, (1st edition 1980) 2nd edition, 1998
POI *The Power of Ideas*, Chatto & Windus, 2000
PSM *The Proper Study of Mankind*, Pimlico, 1998
RR *The Roots of Romanticism*, Chatto & Windus, 1999
RT *Russian Thinkers*, Hogarth, London, 1978
SR *The Sense of Reality*, Pimlico, 1996
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Nederlandse Samenvatting

Doel en methode van deze studie

In het kader van het VU project *'Waartoe is de mens op aarde?'* (2000-2005) heb ik deze dissertatie met als titel '*Isaiah Berlin: A Value Pluralist View and Humanist View of Human Nature and the Mean ing of Life'* geschreven. Het is een project waarin mensbeelden van het Humanisme, Boeddhisme, Hindoeïsme, Christendom en de Islam met elkaar vergeleken worden. Mijn onderzoek gaat over het humanistisch mensbeeld, waarbij de filosoof Isaiah Berlin er een liberale en waardenpluralistische variant op nahoudt.

Berlin is opgegroeid in een Joods gezin in Litouwen. Als jongen vlucht hij met zijn ouders naar Engeland als gevolg van het Communistisch geweld. Hij praktiseert het Joodse geloof niet, maar heeft wel sterk Zionistische gevoelens en helpt mee met de stichting van de staat Israël. Tijdens de Koude Oorlog ontpopt Berlin zich, met name door zijn lezingen op BBC-radio, als een belangrijk criticaster van het Sovjetsysteem en wordt daarmee een beschermer van liberale en humanistische waarden.

Isaiah Berlin is zelf geen wijsgerig antropoloog of godsdienstfilosoof maar een ideeënhistoricus die vooral als essayist heeft gewerkt. Hij heeft dus geen systematisch antropologisch werk nagelaten. Elementen van zijn mensbeeld liggen dan ook verspreid en verborgen in de essays die hij geschreven heeft. Als ideeënhistoricus volgt Isaiah Berlin een politiek of filosofisch idee in de geschiedenis. Hij heeft vele ideeën onderzocht, maar er is één idee in het Westerse denken waar hij zich met verve op heeft gericht en dat volgens hem niet klopt. Het is het idee dat alle goede waarden en doelen waar mensen naar streven harmonieus met elkaar te combineren zijn. En wanneer er tóch conflicten tussen die waarden zijn, dan zou er slechts één oplossing de juiste zijn. Maar volgens Berlin is dat wereldbeeld veel te harmonieus en gaat uit van maar één waarheid (monisme). Waarden kunnen echter met elkaar conflicteren, ook al zijn ze elk afzonderlijk goed en nastrevenswaardig. Bovendien wordt de wereld gekenmerkt door pluralisme. Elke cultuur heeft zo haar eigen voorkeuren in waarden, normen en doelen. Dus ten aanzien van de vraag welke waarde in een waardenconflict vóór moet gaan, daarvoor is niet één vaste oplossing

te geven. Vanuit Berlins kritiek op deze contradictie in het Westerse denken ontstaat een geheel nieuwe filosofische richting, namelijk het waardenpluralisme. Isaiah Berlin is grondlegger hiervan en zijn humanisme wordt dan ook sterk door die nieuwe filosofie gekleurd.

Een belangrijke rode draad in mijn studie is de vraag in hoeverre het waardenpluralisme verschilt van het (postmodern) relativisme. Ik volg in mijn boek, als een 'detective', de worsteling die Berlin zelf heeft. Als waardenpluralist wil hij de culturele en morele verscheidenheid in de wereld respecteren. Maar als humanist wil hij een aantal morele waarden veiligstellen en de mogelijkheid van interculturele communicatie niet uitsluiten.

1. Berlins waardenpluralisme

Het waardenpluralisme, waarvan Isaiah Berlin de grondlegger is, is een stroming binnen de politieke filosofie en de ethiek. De basisgedachten zijn te vinden in zijn beroemde essaybundel *Four Essays on Liberty* (1958).

Er is een groot verschil tussen 'gewoon' pluralisme en waardenpluralisme. Uitgangspunt binnen het 'gewone' pluralisme is de erkenning dat er in de wereld verschillende culturen zijn die er verschillende waarden en normen op nahouden. Het waardenpluralisme gaat een stap verder. Er is niet alleen verschil in waarden en normen, maar waarden, die elk afzonderlijk binnen of buiten een cultuur als goed worden beschouwd, kunnen met elkaar botsen. Vanwege de morele en culturele verscheidenheid in de wereld (pluralisme) bestaat er ook geen universeel geldende maatstaf, op grond waarvan we met z'n allen eens zijn hoe we waardenconflicten éénduidig kunnen oplossen. Bovendien houdt elke oplossing een opoffering in. Het realiseren van de ene waarde gaat ten koste van de andere waarde.

Voorbeeld van een waardenconflict is een rechter die moet kiezen tussen barmhartigheid en rechtvaardigheid. Heeft de rechter teveel begrip voor de slechte jeugd van de dader, dan doet hij geen recht aan het slachtoffer. Een ander voorbeeld van een waardenconflict is de spanning tussen vrijheid en gelijkheid. Wanneer je gelijkheid in een samenleving wenst te realiseren, dan moet je onder andere de vrijheid inperken van mensen om hun zelfverdiende inkomen naar eigen inzicht uit te geven. Maar gun je mensen alle vrijheid, dan eten de wolven de schapen op.

De belangrijkste kenmerken van een waardenconflict zijn: 1) incompatibiliteit, 2) incommensurabiliteit en 3) het altijd betalen van een prijs.

De oorzaak van *incompatibiliteit* is vaak schaarste van geld, ruimte, tijd of het ontbreken van techniek. (Je kunt maar één ding tegelijkertijd doen.) Dit betekent ook dat wanneer het gebrek aan deze factoren verminderd wordt, waardenconflicten weer opgelost kunnen worden. Maar er zijn ook waardenconflicten waarbij schaarste nauwelijks een rol speelt, zoals het waardenconflict tussen rechtvaardigheid en barmhartigheid.

Berlin verstaat onder '*incommensurabiliteit*' het probleem dat verschillende waardensystemen niet vergelijkbaar zijn. Daarom kunnen we niet van te voren zeggen welke van de conflicterende waarden prioriteit moet krijgen. Er is dus geen universeel geldende hogere maatstaf op grond waarvan we zonder meningsverschil kunnen beslissen. (N.B. Bij Berlin betekent incommensurabiliteit dus niet dat paradigma's zo gesloten zijn dat mensen elkaar niet kunnen begrijpen).

Laatste kenmerk van een waardenconflict is ook dat bij het oplossen ervan altijd een *prijs* betaald moet worden. Eén van de goede waarden moeten we opofferen om de andere waarde(n) te kunnen realiseren. En in het geval van een compromis kunnen we de waarden die in conflict zijn met elkaar maar gedeeltelijk of halfslachtig realiseren. Omdat het om goede waarden gaat, doet zo'n opoffering pijn. Vandaar de neiging om bij een compromis niet echt tevreden te zijn, terwijl het mooie ervan is dat de pijn wat eerlijker wordt verdeeld.

Ten aanzien van het vermogen van mensen om waardenconflicten op te lossen is Berlin vrij optimistisch. Mensen zijn volgens hem flexibel. Ze kunnen best een aantal spanningen in het leven op een creatieve wijze opvangen, door bijvoorbeeld met ruimte en tijd te spelen of door nieuwe technieken te verzinnen waardoor conflicterende activiteiten toch te combineren zijn. Het is volgens Berlin in het leven beter om compromissen te vinden dan rigoureuze of/of-keuzes te maken, zoals Beethoven die helemaal voor de muziek ging en zijn gezinsleven opgaf. Mensen zijn volgens Berlin ook goed genoeg om met elkaars belangen rekening te houden en zijn derhalve tot compromissen bereid. Berlin heeft een vrij positieve kijk op de mens en daaruit blijkt zijn humanistische inslag. Dit in tegenstelling tot denkers uit een conservatieve of orthodox-christelijke hoek, die ervan uitgaan dat de mens in wezen zondig en agressief is en tot niets goeds in staat. Het gevolg van zo'n pessimistisch mensbeeld is volgens Berlin de recht-

vaardiging van een politiestaat. Een liberale en open samenleving wordt dan als onmogelijk beschouwd.

Ten aanzien van het oplossen van waardenconflicten wijst Berlin utilistische of deontologische (Kantiaanse) principes af omdat ze uiteindelijk op monisme (één waarheid of één juist principe) gebaseerd zijn. Berlin hanteert een niet direct tot Aristoteles terug te voeren vorm van deugdenethiek, waarbij het vooral gaat om de praktische wijsheid en de werkelijkheidszin van de beslisser.

Het is belangrijk voor Berlin dat mensen hun keuze in een waardenconflict rechtvaardigen. Maar hoe is dit mogelijk wanneer er geen universeel geldende hogere maatstaven zijn? Rationele afwegingen zijn volgens Berlin nog steeds mogelijk door te verwijzen naar de maatstaven van de eigen samenleving. In geval van conflicterende maatstaven of principes wordt in de concrete situatie vaak duidelijk welke waarde moet vóór gaan. Ten aanzien van persoonlijke beslissingen kan ook gekeken worden naar consistentie met het eigen levensplan waarin bepaalde waarden in de levensloop belangrijker zijn gebleken dan andere waarden. Een punt van kritiek is dat Berlin een vrij holistische identiteit vooronderstelt, terwijl zijn waardenpluralisme, inclusief de daarin voorkomende conflicterende rollen, tot meer fragmentatie leidt.

2. Zonder hoop op een harmonieuze wereld

Cruciaal voor Berlin is, dat de wereld van waarden die de mens omringt niet harmonieus is. Een belangrijke consequentie daarvan is dat zowel het individuele leven als het maatschappelijk leven niet volmaakt kunnen zijn. Een volmaakt (maatschappelijk) leven is een utopie! We kunnen immers daarin niet alle goede waarden combineren.

De klasseloze heilstaat van de communisten is volgens Berlin een voorbeeld van zo'n utopie. Geloofd werd dat mensen volledig gelijk konden zijn zonder vrijheid te moeten opofferen. Tijdens de Koude Oorlog bestreed Isaiah Berlin (met behulp van politiek-filosofische essays en radiolezingen voor de BBC) deze vorm van utopisme. De beoogde hemel op aarde bleek in de praktijk meer op een hel te lijken. In de voormalige Sovjet-Unie werden dissidenten en Christenen streng vervolgd met als rechtvaardiging dat zij de komst van de heilstaat in de weg zouden staan. In de jaren '80 van de 20ste eeuw zag Berlin in de revolutie in Iran dezelfde denkfout. Ook de Islamitische heilsstaat waarin de *shar'ia* strikt wordt toegepast is volgens Berlin een utopie. De heilstaat zal nooit de beloofde vrede brengen, want waarden zullen

blijven conflicteren en er zijn altijd mensen die andere waarden in hun leven nastreven, een ander geloof aanhangen of helemaal niet in een laatste oordeel of hiernamaals geloven. Zij zullen zich verzetten tegen het dwingend opleggen van een ideaal dat zij niet delen.

Berlin wijst niet alleen het utopisch denken zelf af, maar ook het idee erachter, namelijk dat de geschiedenis een hoger doel zou hebben in de van richting zo'n perfecte samenleving. Berlin wijst vormen van teleologisch denken af voorzover zij inhouden dat het leven een vóórgegeven hogere zin zou hebben.

Wat is volgens Berlin– rekening houdend met waardenpluralisme - de beste rol van de overheid? De overheid dient in ieder geval geen inhoudelijke visie van het goede leven (zoals een theocratisch of egalitair ideaal) op te leggen aan de burgers. Bij voorkeur dient een overheid alleen maar 'fatsoenlijk' (*decent*) te zijn. Daarmee bedoelt Berlin dat de overheid zich allereerst aan een aantal basiswaarden houdt, zoals niet martelen, niet discrimineren en eerlijke rechtspraak. Ook moet een fatsoenlijke overheid rekening houden met pluralisme. Burgers en groepen moeten zoveel mogelijk vrij gelaten worden om hun eigen doelen na te streven, mits die niet schadelijk zijn voor andere burgers. Het liberalisme is volgens Berlin in de praktijk de meest stabiele politieke vorm gebleken om met het pluralisme om te gaan. Bijvoorbeeld, onder een liberale overheid ben je vrij om op zondag te gaan winkelen of dat juist niet te doen. In een theocratie hebben niet-gelovigen of anders-gelovigen die vrijheid niet en zij zullen zich daartegen verzetten. Verder dient een overheid rekening te houden met waardenconflicten die onherroepelijk in de samenleving plaats vinden. Het beste is om compromissen te zoeken waarbij de pijn eerlijk verdeeld wordt en niet eenzijdig bij één partij of belang gelegd wordt.

Het denken van Berlin is dus sterk anti-teleologisch (in metafysische zin). Het ontbreken van een geloof in een hoger doel in de geschiedenis en daarmee in het privé-leven is volgens Berlin geen reden om het leven zelf als zinloos te beschouwen. Volgens Berlin is de zin van het leven het leven zelf. Zonder geloof in een hoger doel wordt de kwaliteit van het leven er zelfs beter op. Zo'n geloof is vaak de rechtvaardiging van geweld geweest. In de loop der geschiedenis zijn veel mensen als ketter of als dissident op brandstapels of in concentratiekampen terechtgekomen omdat zij er een ander doel op nahielden.

3. Een nastrever van doelen

Isaiah Berlin definieert de mens primair als een 'nastrever van doelen en waarden'. Om doelen en waarden na te streven heeft een mens keuzevrijheid nodig. Wanneer die keuzevrijheid zodanig beperkt wordt, dat er nauwelijks meer waarden en doelen nagestreefd kunnen worden, dan kan er volgens Berlin niet meer over echt menszijn gesproken worden. De Nazi's probeerden in de concentratiekampen mensen op deze wijze te dehumaniseren. De essentie van het menszijn gaat volgens Berlin verloren wanneer er geen vrijheid meer is doelen en waarden na te streven. Berlin is overigens vrij zuinig met het gebruik van de term 'essentie van de mens'. De reden hiervoor is dat die term vrij gemakkelijk gekoppeld kan worden aan een vóórgegeven inhoudelijk doel en dat beperkt, zoals we reeds zaken, de vrijheid. Ten aanzien van keuzevrijheid gebruikt Berlin de term 'essentie' wel, en dat betekent dat keuzevrijheid een wezenskenmerk voor Berlin is. De mens streeft dus volgens Berlin doelen na. Dit is van te voren gegeven en ligt eigenlijk in de natuur van de mens vast. Het is belangrijk te zien dat dit nog niet iets inhoudelijks zegt over welke doelen een man of vrouw moet nastreven in het leven. Qua inhoud zijn de doelen niet metafysisch, door de natuur of God, vóórgegeven. Ze liggen dus niet van te voren vast en de mens kan dus zelf kiezen. Met Jean-Paul Sartre spreekt Berlin zelfs over het gedoemd zijn tot kiezen. In waardenconflicten moeten we kiezen en zijn we verantwoordelijk voor de gevolgen, ook al hebben we dat liever niet. Berlin beseft tegelijkertijd dat waar de mens uit kan kiezen, toch ook weer sterk afhankelijk is van wat de gemeenschap, waarin hij of zij leeft, te bieden heeft. Sterk bepalend is wat een gemeenschap belangrijk vindt. Allerlei rollen en patronen zijn in die zin vóórgegeven. Het is erg moeilijk om als individu tegen de stroom in iets anders te kiezen of zelfs je gemeenschap te verlaten. Maar onmogelijk is het volgens Berlin niet. De mens wordt volgens Berlin weliswaar sterk gevormd door de gemeenschap, maar wordt er uiteindelijk niet door bepaald.

Betekent de karakterisering van de mens als 'nastrever van waarden' dat de mens een ontdekker is van waarden die van te voren gegeven zijn of dat de mens zelf schepper van die waarden is? Berlin heeft hier een dilemma. Als humanist wil hij een aantal basiswaarden zoals de mensenrechten veiligstellen. Het is dan beter dat waarden voorgegeven zijn, universeel geldig en onafhankelijk van wat mensen er zelf van vinden of maken. Maar dat is weer in strijd met zijn respect voor culturele en morele verscheidenheid in de wereld. Berlin be-

schrijft als ideeënhistoricus hoe, na Kant, in de Romantiek het idee is ontstaan van de subjectiviteit van moraal. Het gevolg hiervan is een ontwikkeling naar een wil die alles zelf wil bepalen en zich door niets en niemand wenst te laten beperken. Bij denkers als Fichte, Schopenhauer en Nietzsche zien we zo'n ongestoorde wil verschijnen. In de praktijk wordt zo'n radicale vorm van subjectivisme volgens Berlin afgeremd. Mensen zijn geen atomen maar altijd onderdeel van een gemeenschap waarin hun levensproject en meningen ook erkend moeten worden. (In hoofdstuk 6 vinden we een andere wijze waarop Berlin radicaal subjectivisme beperkt.)

4. De behoefte aan erkenning en de behoefte om tot een gemeenschap te behoren

Isaiah Berlin verwerpt het soort liberalisme waarin individuele vrijheid zó centraal staat dat dit leidt tot vergaand individualisme. De mens is volgens Berlin geen alleenstaand atoom. Mensen hebben ook een diepgewortelde behoefte bij een groep of gemeenschap te behoren en als lid van die groep als zodanig erkend te worden. Ze hebben gemeenschappen en groepen nodig om hun identiteit te kunnen ontwikkelen. Die groepen zijn volgens Berlin primair gebaseerd op nationaliteit, cultuur en/of religiositeit. In een gemeenschappelijke taal kunnen mensen naar elkaar toe hun gevoelens uiten. Met behulp van de culturele uitingen van hun gemeenschap kunnen zij hun creativiteit tot uitdrukking brengen. Voor de ontwikkeling van hun persoonlijke identiteit moeten mensen dit onderdeel zijn van een hechte groep.

Een belangrijk inzicht van Berlin is de diepe behoefte van de mens aan erkenning als lid van een groep. Wanneer mensen als minderheid in een land wonen en waarin hun gemeenschap niet erkend worden, zullen zij zich daar onherroepelijk tegen verzetten. Dit uit zich vaak in een onafhankelijkheidsstrijd, al dan niet gecombineerd met terroristische aanslagen. Die behoefte aan erkenning gaat zelfs zo ver dat minderheden bereid zijn hun vrijheid of zelfs hun leven op te geven. Berlin maakt onderscheid tussen gezond en ziek nationalisme. Een beetje vaderlandsliefde hoort volgens Berlin bij de mens, maar we moeten ervoor oppassen dat het niet ontaardt in een quasi-religie en in agressie.

Waarom geeft Berlin in zijn mensbeeld ruimte voor de behoefte aan erkenning en de mogelijkheid van een gezond nationalisme? De reden hiervan moet gezocht worden in Berlins eigen Zionistische ge-

voelens. De reden waarom het Joodse volk een eigen staat nodig heeft, is volgens de niet-religieuze Berlin een gezonde identiteitsvorming. Als lid van een culturele of religieuze minderheid heeft de mens eigenlijk maar twee keuzes. Zich aanpassen aan de meerderheid en daarmee de eigen identiteit opgeven (assimilatie), of zich afzonderen van de meerderheid (segregatie). Maar in beide gevallen kan volgens Berlin de identiteit zich eigenlijk niet goed ontwikkelen. Iemand die de cultuur van een ander moet nabootsen kan niet echt creatief zijn. Een emigrant uit elk ander land in de wereld heeft altijd de keuze om terug te gaan naar het thuisland wanneer de prijs te hoog geacht wordt. Maar de joden hadden tot voor 1948 helemaal geen thuisland; dus is het belangrijk om ten behoeve van een gezonde identiteitsontwikkeling zo'n thuisland te creëren.

Later realiseert Berlin zich dat de Palestijnen ook recht hebben op eigen land en erkenning van hun identiteit. Hij had bij de oprichting van de staat Israël eigenlijk gedacht, dat de Joden en Palestijnen vreedzaam in één land konden leven, en niet verwacht dat er in beide groepen zoveel fanatisme zou zijn. Maar is dat fanatisme niet het gevolg van een verengde identiteitsvorming binnen de eigen groep? En wordt het radicalisme niet veroorzaakt door zich niet aan te passen aan waarden die voor een pluralistische samenleving noodzakelijk zijn, zoals tolerantie en respect voor verschil? Eigenlijk botst Berlins waardenpluralisme met zijn Zionisme. Hij worstelde tot aan het eind van zijn leven zelf ook met dit probleem. Als Zionist had hij bezwaren tegen gedwongen assimilatie (integratie) van minderheden. Aan het eind van zijn leven (1997) gaf Berlin toe dat in een pluralistische samenleving waarin mensen vreedzaam willen samenleven enige assimilatie (maar wel begrensd) nodig is om radicalisme uit te bannen. Dit betekent echter niet dat Berlin het kosmopolitisch alternatief aanhangt waarbij mensen wereldburgers moeten worden om etnische en religieuze conflicten te voorkomen. Het behoren tot een etnische en/of religieuze groep is voor hem wezenlijk voor de identiteit van mensen.

5. In staat andere culturen te begrijpen

In hoofdstuk 5 geef ik allereerst een historisch overzicht hoe Berlin zich epistemologisch (kentheoretisch) ontwikkelt. Berlin laat het logisch positivisme van de jaren '30 van de 20ste eeuw achter zich, maar blijvend is zijn weerstand tegen metafysica en de noodzaak één en ander tenminste empirisch te bewijzen. Berlin laat zich inspireren door Oxford-collega's zoals Ryle, Austin en Wittgenstein. Door dagelijks

taalgebruik serieus te nemen en afwijkingen in de taal goed te onderzoeken kan een aantal filosofische problemen 'therapeutisch' opgelost worden. Van grote invloed is ook Kants inzicht dat ons denken en onze waarneming worden bepaald door concepten en categorieën. Die concepten en categorieën zijn volgens Berlin historisch bepaald. Als ideeënhistoricus beseft Berlin dat er ook concepten (ideeën) en categorieën zijn die de werkelijkheid geen recht doen en in moreel opzicht tot ellende leiden. De onjuistheid ervan moet aan de kaak gesteld worden en dat doet Berlin dan ook in vele van zijn essays.

Berlin gaat uit van grote culturele verscheidenheid in de wereld. Door die culturele verscheidenheid en al die verschillende talen kunnen mensen de wereld op een geheel andere wijze zien en ervaren dan anderen. Ze kunnen elkaar dan niet begrijpen. Berlin erkent dit probleem, maar toch is het volgens hem niet zo dat mensen elkaar helemaal niet kunnen begrijpen. Er is altijd een basis die we met elkaar delen. We delen immers het menszijn met elkaar en een klein aantal concepten en categorieën is derhalve universeel aanwezig. Ook zijn er criteria van wat waar is en niet waar, die algemeen gedeeld zijn. Alle mensen denken bijvoorbeeld in termen van ruimte en tijd. Dus iemand die beweert op twee plaatsen tegelijkertijd geweest te zijn, wordt in vrijwel elke cultuur als een leugenaar ontmaskerd.

Via het denken van Giambattista Vico (Napels, 17e eeuw) geeft Berlin nog een reden aan waarom mensen elkaar kunnen begrijpen. Wat alle mensen namelijk met elkaar gemeen hebben is het nastreven van waarden en doelen. Die waarden en doelen hoeven we niet noodzakelijkerwijs op inhoudelijke gronden met elkaar te delen, maar we kunnen het streven ernaar wel begrijpen. Mensen beschikken over empathische vermogens. Door ons in een andere cultuur in te leven kunnen we elkaar toch begrijpen.

Berlin richtte zich in zijn denken sterk op Amerikaanse en Britse collega's die in het algemeen pragmatischer en optimistischer zijn ten aanzien van de mogelijkheden van de mens. Berlin miste de naoorlogse continentale ontwikkelingen. Hij heeft wel geprobeerd de werken van Heidegger te lezen, maar vond het continentale denken en taalgebruik veel te obscuur en warrig. De naoorlogse continentale filosofie is in het algemeen veel pessimistischer ten aanzien van het menselijk vermogen elkaar te begrijpen. Er zijn culturele verschillen waarvan de horizon nooit overbrugd kan worden.

6. Uitgerust met een basismoraal

Berlin erkent dat er morele verscheidenheid is in de wereld. Waarden en normen worden sterk bepaald door de verschillende culturen waar mensen vandaan komen. Ten aanzien van de ethiek leidt dit tot het probleem van het moreel relativisme. Mensenrechten kunnen dan gezien worden als een typisch westers product. Bij het schenden ervan, zoals het plegen van genocide en martelingen, kunnen daders zich beroepen op de normen en waarden en zelfs de wetgeving van hun land. En dat is dan ook precies gebeurd tijdens de processen van Neurenberg na de Tweede Wereldoorlog. De Nazi's verwezen naar de wetgeving die op dat moment onder Hitler heerste en waaraan ze zich keurig hebben gehouden. Op grond waarvan kunnen schendingen van mensenrechten dan toch veroordeeld worden?

Volgens Berlin kunnen deze daders, ook al beroepen zij zich op de dan geldende regelgeving van hun land, wel degelijk veroordeeld worden. De reden daarvoor is dat alle mensen volgens hem beschikken over een basismoraal. Die basis is vrij smal, maar iedereen weet gewoon dat je niet zomaar mensen mag doden of martelen. De naam die in de loop van het Westerse denken aan die basismoraal is gegeven is 'de natuurwet'. Sommigen geloven dat die natuurwet door God gegeven is, anderen dat deze moraal gewoon met het menszijn gegeven is. Maar op grond van deze universeel gedeelde natuurwet is het dus mogelijk mensen buiten je eigen cultuur te veroordelen en kunnen we internationale tribunalen inrichten. De Nazi's hadden kunnen weten dat de genocide die ze pleegden verkeerd is.

Maar is het geloof in een basismoraal niet in strijd met Berlins waardenpluralisme dat juist van morele verscheidenheid in de wereld uitgaat? Het waardenpluralisme blijkt toch een andere filosofische positie te zijn dan het moreel relativisme. Er is een basismoraal ook al is die vrij smal. Daarnaast erkennen waardenpluralisten dat mensen ook een brede morele en culturele bagage hebben, die nodig is om een cultuur en samenleving in stand te houden. En dat kan in elke cultuur weer anders zijn. Het is eigenlijk een combinatie van 'the best of both worlds'. Met de basismoraal in de hand kan je mensenrechtenschenders, die zich op hun eigen cultuur en rechtspraak beroepen, toch veroordelen. Tegelijkertijd kan je de culturele en morele verscheidenheid respecteren, zolang die niet tegen de basismoraal indruist. Op deze wijze lost Berlin zijn eigen 'waardenconflict' op.

Berlin vooronderstelt dat mensen een onderscheid kunnen maken tussen moraal die behoort tot de 'natuurwet' en moraal en gewoonten

die nodig zijn om een cultuur in stand te houden. Dit uit zich bijvoorbeeld in het protest onder het volk wanneer een vorst onrechtvaardige wetgeving uitvaardigt om bepaalde belangen veilig te stellen. "Lex iniusta non est lex', zei Thomas van Aquino al in zijn reflectie over de natuurwet. Denkers die een meer conventionalistische positie innemen ontkennen de universaliteit van dit vermogen en zien het als een typisch Westerse manier van denken.

Tussen de erg smalle basismoraal en de brede moraal die nodig is om een cultuur in stand te houden is er ook een tussengebied. Er zijn waarden die strikt genomen het product zijn van het Westerse denken maar die intussen zo belangrijk geworden zijn dat we ze niet zouden missen en er eigenlijk universele geldigheid voor zouden willen claimen. Voorbeelden van zulke waarden zijn het respect voor privacy en gelijkheid. Volgens Berlin kunnen relativiteit en subjectiviteit in grote mate voorkomen worden. Deze waarden zijn in de loop der (Westerse) geschiedenis in het denken en de taal van de Westerse mens zodanig uitgekristalliseerd en zo vanzelfsprekend geworden, dat we die waarden als absoluut zien en afwijkingen ervan niet accepteren. De term die Berlin voor het resultaat van dit kristallisatieproces gebruikt is de *philosophia perennis.*

Tot de basiscategorieën in het menselijk denken en taal behoort ook het beeld van wat we onder een normaal mens verstaan. Zo'n mens heeft motieven die we niet noodzakelijkerwijs hoeven te delen, maar wel kunnen begrijpen. De redenen die mensen voor hun daden geven kunnen echter niet oneindig variëren. Wanneer die motieven buiten ons begripsvermogen vallen, is er sprake van (morele) gestoordheid. Conventionalistische denkers ontkennen de gemeenschappelijkheid in het mensbeeld die Berlin vooronderstelt en benadrukken dat ons begripsvermogen bepaald wordt door de gemeenschap waarin je leeft. Daarmee vervalt ook de noodzaak om mensen die buiten onze begripskaders vallen voor gek te verklaren.

Ten aanzien van de morele motivatie is Berlin optimistisch te noemen. Wanneer mensen beseffen dat hun moraal uiteindelijk mensenwerk is en niet eeuwig en voor iedereen vastligt in een hemel, zullen zij toch de 'morele volwassenheid' kunnen opbrengen om zich aan de regels te houden. Berlin schreef deze gedachten op in een tijd dat de Engelsen bekend waren om hun keurige rijen voor de dubbeldekker.

Wanneer morele motivatie zich vertaalt in de bereidheid tot maatschappelijk engagement heeft Berlin als waardenpluralist nog een

probleem. De inzet voor een bepaalde waarde kan een nieuw waardenconflict oproepen. Zelfs wanneer je voedsel stuurt naar hongerende kindertjes in de Sahel-zone, dan betekent dat ecologisch gezien op langere termijn een verdergaande verwoestijning door overbevolking. Waarom zou een waardenpluralist zich nog inzetten voor een ideaal? Berlin ziet nauwelijks in dat zijn waardenpluralisme kan leiden tot scepticisme en gebrek aan idealisme.

7. Verblind door 'verkeerde' ideeën

De verklaring die Berlin geeft voor het kwaad in de mens is dat deze verblind wordt door 'verkeerde' ideeën en idealen. Mensen denken het goede na te streven, zoals een klasseloze heilsstaat (Marxisme), of het zielenheil van de gelovigen (de Inquisitie). Het doel heiligt de middelen, dus vaak worden de meest verschrikkelijke middelen ingezet om hun ideaal te bereiken. Daarbij is geen offer groot genoeg. Berlin beseft dat ideeën een enorme kracht hebben om mensen te mobiliseren. Hij is daarom een ideeënhistoricus geworden. Door na te gaan hoe een idee is ontstaan en de denkfouten daarin te ontmaskeren, kan volgens hem veel kwaad in de wereld weggenomen worden.

Een belangrijke oorzaak van het kwaad is volgens Berlin ook het idee dat bepaalde groepen mensen eigenlijk niet tot de gemeenschappelijke mensheid (*common human nature*) behoren, maar onmensen zijn. Deze onmensen zijn een bedreiging voor de eigen groep en mogen daarom als onkruid vernietigd worden. Voorbeelden van deze groepen zijn Joden en kapitalisten. Communiceren met ze heeft weinig zin, het zijn eigenlijk geen volwaardige mensen. Wat Hitler, Lenin en Stalin ontkennen is dat mensen een gemeenschappelijke menselijke natuur hebben. Hoezeer we cultureel van elkaar verschillen, we delen volgens Berlin ook altijd het menszijn met elkaar. Hierdoor kunnen we, hoe moeilijk het soms ook kan zijn, altijd proberen met elkaar te communiceren. Berlin is er huiverig voor om bepaalde groepen mensen als onmensen af te schilderen. Hij deed dat destijds zelfs niet met de Nazi's. Het is altijd mogelijk met elkaar in gesprek te gaan en de motieven, ook al zijn de daden afschuwelijk, proberen te begrijpen.

Sinds de Tweede Wereldoorlog is er kritiek op een zienswijze op het kwaad zoals die van Berlin, waarbij de verklaring van het kwaad gezocht wordt in het volgen van verkeerde ideeën. Met de Holocaust is er namelijk een nieuw soort kwaad in de wereld gekomen: 'het radicale kwaad' zoals de filosofe Hannah Arendt het noemt. Het kwaad dat in de concentratiekampen is geschied is zo verschrikkelijk, dat het

buiten ons voorstellingsvermogen reikt. Er is kwaad om het kwaad gepleegd en dit kwaad is niet te verklaren door herkenbare menselijke motieven, zoals hebzucht. We kunnen dit kwaad volgens haar echt niet begrijpen door een (empatisch) inlevingsvermogen en door te kijken naar de doelen en waarden die mensen nastreven. Maar volgens Berlin kunnen we elkaar altijd begrijpen, ook al zijn we het moreel niet met elkaar eens. We kunnen de ideeën erachter opsporen en er iets aan doen! Deze mogelijkheid om iets aan het kwaad te doen wil Berlin niet opgeven, hoezeer hij ook erkent dat de 20ste eeuw toch wel de afschuwelijkste en bloedigste van de geschiedenis is geweest.

Wat Berlin verzuimt te verklaren is waarom sommige mensen ertoe komen andere mensen als onmensen af te schilderen en het gedeelde menszijn te ontkennen. Ze gebruiken daarbij heel bewust propagandamiddelen om de publieke opinie om te vormen. Vanuit bijvoorbeeld het christelijk perspectief wordt geloofd dat het kwaad in de mens toch dieper gaat dan alleen maar slachtoffer zijn van een verkeerd idee van wat het goede is. Maar van termen als 'geneigd tot alle kwaad' en 'erfzonde' wil de humanist Berlin niets weten. De reden hiervoor is dat hij te scherp de keerzijde ziet van een te negatief mensbeeld. Wanneer mensen tot geen goeds in staat zijn, dan is het enige alternatief een totalitaire politiestaat. Een liberale open samenleving wordt dan onmogelijk.

8. Samenvatting en conclusie

Mijn proefschrift besluit ik met een samenvatting van Berlins antropologie en zoektocht om zowel recht te doen aan universaliteit als particulariteit in de moraal. In deze Nederlandse samenvatting heb ik deze perspectieven gecombineerd. Verder geef ik in het slothoofdstuk aan in welk opzicht Berlin een nastrever en een uitdager van het humanisme is. Typisch humanistisch is zijn vertrouwen in de mogelijkheden van de mens. Vanuit zijn waardenpluralisme bekritiseert Berlin echter alle vormen van humanisme, die vanuit een te harmonieus mens- en wereldbeeld grootse idealen voor de samenleving hebben en daarmee geen recht doen aan de morele en culturele verscheidenheid in de wereld.

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