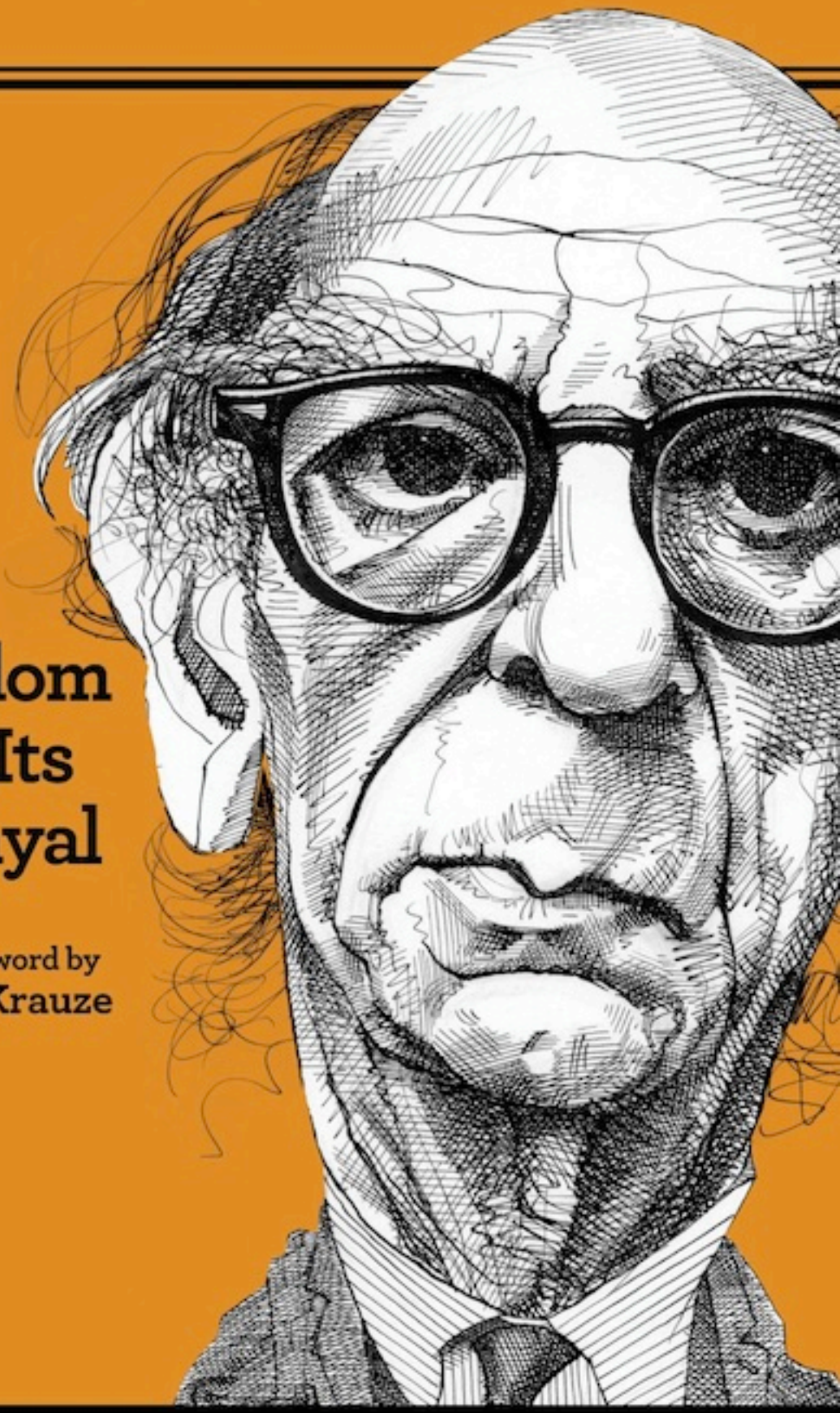
# Isaiah Berlin



# Freedom and Its Betrayal

With a foreword by
Enrique Krauze

Edited by Henry Hardy

# Fichte

More than any other German thinker, Johann Gottlieb Fichte appears to me to be responsible for launching an idea of freedom which is in sharp contrast and disagreement with that notion of freedom or liberty normally held by Western – that is to say, principally English, French and American – thinkers in the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth century.

Suppose that you were travelling about Europe at some time between the years 1800 and 1820. You would have discovered, to your surprise, that although the word 'freedom' was on every lip from the East to the West – although, if anything, the Germans and Austrians talked about it with more passion and eloquence even than people in France and in England – yet the meaning attached to the word differed widely between the two parts of Europe. It bore a very different sense in Germany from that which it appeared to have for thinkers in the great Anglo-French tradition.

What does 'freedom' mean for the principal political writers of the West at this time, for Condorcet, say, for Tom Paine, for Benjamin Constant – three representative thinkers, all of whom felt passionately on this subject, and all writers whose ideas had a very considerable influence both on contemporaries and on posterity? Let me quote a specimen passage from Constant, a very moderate, sensible liberal whose political writings belong to the beginning of the nineteenth century and who spoke for a large body of liberal democrats of his time. In a lecture delivered in 1819, in which he compares what he calls the modern with the

ancient notion of liberty, he asks what his contemporaries mean by 'liberty'. This is his definition:

> It is the individual's right to be subject only to law, his right not to be arrested or detained or put to death or maltreated in any way as the result of the arbitrary will of one or several persons. It is every man's right to express his opinion, to choose his craft and exercise it, to dispose of his property, even to misuse it if he wishes; to come and go without getting permission for it, and without having to give any account of his reasons or motives. It is each man's right to associate himself with others, whether to discuss his own interests or to profess his religion, if he wishes, with his associates, or simply to pass his days and hours in any manner that accords with his inclination or his fancy. Finally it is everyone's right to influence the conduct of the government whether by nominating some or all of its public servants, or by representations, petitions, demands, which the authorities are more or less compelled to take into its consideration.

Then he adds that in the ancient world it was not so; there, although in some sense the individual was sovereign in public affairs, he was much more controlled and restricted in his private life; whereas in modern States, even in democratic States, the individual seemed comparatively powerless to influence the decisions of the political authorities; and fought precisely for this right.

That is a fair sample of what the word 'liberty' meant to moderate defenders of it in the early nineteenth century. But you would find that it was very different in the Germany of this period.

Fichte was always saying that liberty was the only subject with which he was at all concerned. 'My system, from beginning to end, is merely an analysis of the concept of freedom, […] no other ingredient enters into it.' Then he warns the reader – and warns him very clearly – by insisting that his doctrine is very

dark, and the language is not to be understood by ordinary men; that a special act of transformation or conversion or illumination is needed before the deep significance of his inspired utterance can be understood at all.

> To men [Fichte declares] as they are in their ordinary education, our philosophical theory must be absolutely unintelligible, for the object of which it speaks does not exist for them; they do not possess that special faculty for which, and by which, alone this object has any being. It is as if one were talking to men blind from birth; men who know things and their relations only by touch, and one spoke to them about colours and the relations of colours.

The reason why it is so unintelligible to ordinary men is that they are not endowed with the special, profoundly metaphysical faculty of perceiving such invaluable truths, which are open only to a very few men in each generation. Fichte regards himself as one of these few. His grasp of the essence of freedom is due to this special penetration into the nature of the universe. Let me explain this a little further.

The principal preoccupation of many Western European thinkers was to guard the liberty of the individual against encroachment by other individuals. What they meant by liberty was non-interference – a fundamentally negative concept. Treated in that way, it is the subject of the great classical thesis – the essay *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill, which to this day remains the most eloquent, the most sincere and the most convincing plea for individual freedom ever uttered.

This is what liberty meant to Condorcet. This is what it meant to the majority of those French rebels who raised revolutionary standards in order to liberate the individual, and then sent their armies across Europe in order to liberate other nations. The assumption is that each individual has certain tastes, certain desires, certain inclinations, and wishes to lead his life in a certain

fashion. Certainly he cannot be allowed to do so wholly, because if he does he will interfere too much with the similar ends of others. But a certain vacuum round him has to be created, a certain space within which he may be allowed to fulfil what might be called his reasonable wishes. One should not criticise these wishes. Each man's ends are his own; the business of the State is to prevent collisions; to act as a kind of traffic policeman and nightwatchman, as the German socialist Lassalle contemptuously observed later in the century; simply to see to it that people do not clash with each other too much in the fulfilling of those personal ends about which they themselves are the ultimate authorities. Liberty means non-encroachment; liberty therefore means non-impingement by one person on another.

Rousseau put this very clearly when he said: 'The nature of things does not madden us, only ill will does.' Slavery means being a slave to a person, not to the nature of things. Of course, we use the word 'freedom' in various metaphorical senses also. We speak of people not merely as being literally slaves, in the sense in which Uncle Tom was a slave to Simon Legree in the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but also in the sense in which a man is said to be a slave to his passions, a slave to the bottle, a slave to this, that or the other obsession. This sense of being a slave, though widespread, is nevertheless a metaphor; it is quite clear that there is a more literal and concrete sense in which, if a man is tied to a tree or imprisoned, he cannot by any possible perversion of language be said to be free; whereas a man who simply suffers from other kinds of inability is not usually described as a *slave*. There are all sorts of things I may be unable to do, but this does not make me a slave. I cannot fly to the sky with wings; I cannot count beyond five million; I cannot understand the works of Hegel. There are all sorts of things which I say I cannot do. But because I cannot understand the works of Hegel, and because I cannot fly through the air at more than a certain velocity, I do not describe myself as a slave. To be a slave is not the same thing

as to be unable to do something; to be a slave is to be *prevented* from doing something, not by the nature of things, but by other persons.

Even economic slavery, which is often referred to in socialist writings, simply means that it is idle to offer rights to people who cannot use them; idle to give the penniless and the starving the right to purchase food and clothes for which they have not got the money. This is usually put by saying that political liberty is useless without economic liberty; but the assumption behind it is that they cannot buy these things, not because of some natural disability, as a cripple cannot walk a long distance because he is a cripple, but because other persons are preventing them. So long as there is not this notion of prevention by persons, the notion of liberty does not arise. Liberty is being free from the intervention, from the interference, of other persons. When they interfere accidentally, the lack of freedom is due to bad luck or mismanagement; when they do it deliberately, it is called oppression.

All this may hold for the thinkers of the West, where the principal problem was to put an end to what were regarded as the arbitrary rules of certain individuals self-constituted as authorities over the vast majority. But there is also another notion of freedom, which blossomed among the Germans, and to this we must now turn our attention.

The Germans were worried evidently not so much by ill will, on which Rousseau laid stress, as by the nature of things, which Rousseau had pronounced irrelevant. To them freedom seemed to mean freedom from the iron necessities of the universe – not so much from wicked or foolish persons, or social mismanagement, as from the rigorous laws of the external world.

To some extent this is due to the political state of the Germans in the eighteenth century. The Germans were, throughout this period, suffering from the appalling humiliation inflicted upon them by the victories of Richelieu and Louis XIV of France in the seventeenth century; and from political divisions, economic

impotence, and the general obscurantism and backwardness of the average German citizen in the century which followed the Thirty Years War. Another factor of genuine importance was the absolute dependence of the German on the arbitrary will of the Prince, which gave him a sense of being a humbler citizen of the universe than the triumphant French or the free and proud English.

To such a man, what does it mean to be free? If you are living in sad circumstances, the first thing which impinges upon your consciousness is that there are very few things you *can* do. Either you have not the material means, or your ruler is unjust, brutal or stupid. Or there are too many natural misfortunes which rain down upon you. Or there is some other way in which you are hemmed in: you are placed in situations where the number of things which you can do is very small. The thought of freedom becomes at once something which is in practice unrealisable and, as an ideal, deeply and passionately desirable.

The reaction to this situation, which often occurs in the history of humanity, was to say, 'If I cannot get what I want, then perhaps by depriving myself of the want itself I shall make my life happier. Evidently I shall not be made happy by pining to get what powerful persons or adverse circumstances will not let me have. But perhaps by killing within myself the desire for these things I shall achieve that calm and that serenity which is as good a substitute for owning the things which I want as can be found in this vale of tears.'

This was the mood in which, when the Greek city State was declining, the Stoics and the Epicureans argued. This was the mood in the first century AD in which the Roman Stoics of that period, and indeed the early Christians also, preached their great sermons. This is indeed a truth which became particularly vivid for the Germans of the eighteenth century. There are many things which I want, but circumstances will not let me have them. Well then, I must defend myself against this outer universe, I

must somehow contract the area which is vulnerable to these adversities. Instead of trying to lunge forward and obtain things which I cannot get, and merely being defeated and destroyed in the process, I must make a strategic retreat. I must go to a place where the tyrant and evil fortune cannot reach me. If I do not expose so much of myself, so great a surface, to these adverse factors, perhaps I shall be safer.

This is psychologically, and indeed sociologically, in part responsible for the doctrine of the unassailable inner life. I try to contract myself into my private world. I say to myself, 'The tyrant wants to deprive me of every opportunity of advancement, the tyrant wants to destroy my substance; very well, let him do so – these things do not matter. What he can have, let him have; I shall cut these things off from myself, for they are of no value to me. If I do not want to keep them, I shall not miss them if they are taken away.' It is a curious, strategic retreat into an inner citadel. I say to myself, 'If I preserve my own spirit, my inward serenity, if I keep myself to my own inner thoughts, if I cultivate inner ideals, the tyrant cannot reach that realm. If my body is exposed to his power, let him have it; if my wealth is something which he can confiscate, let him have it. I shall concentrate upon what is out of his reach – my inner spirit, my inner self.' This is the source of the re-emergence of the doctrine, which has its roots deep both in Christianity and in Judaism, of the two selves: the spiritual, inner, immaterial, eternal soul; and the empirical, outer, physical, material self, which is a prey to every misfortune, which is subject to the iron laws of the material world, from which no man may escape.

For natural scientists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and for some of the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century, too (according to whom man is but a collection of molecules like every other object in nature, and subject to the unalterable laws which govern such molecules), to protest against nature is folly, for we cannot change the material laws of the universe, the

physics of it, however oppressive we may find this. And there is no way out.

So there are two enemies from which I must escape. One is the inexorable material laws that govern matter; and the other is the arbitrary willpower of wicked men, the caprice of fortune, and unhappy circumstances. I escape these by what I should like to describe as a very sublime, very grand form of the doctrine of sour grapes. I say that if I cannot have these things, then I do not want them. If I can only kill the desire in myself, the non-satisfaction of it will not irk me. In short, it is a doctrine which says that a desire satisfied and a desire killed come to much the same thing. But this entails various paradoxes. Is a man happier if he has forty desires of which he satisfies only ten, or if he has only two desires and satisfies them both? If freedom means doing what I want, is not a man happier – and freer – who wants less, and therefore has less to do, than a man who wants more and can do far less of what he wants?

It is Rousseau, again, who said that that man is truly free who 'desires what he is able to perform, and does what he desires'. If I desire little, the area within which I can be frustrated is correspondingly smaller. If this view is pushed to the uttermost, it leads almost to suicidal conclusions – literally suicidal ones. I have a pain in my leg. There are two ways of curing it: one is by applying medicine, but the other is by cutting off my leg. The tyrant oppresses me. There are two ways of resisting him: by killing the tyrant, or by making myself impervious to his blows, by not thinking about him, by giving him all he wants, by losing all desire to keep anything of which conceivably, in a moment of the wildest aberration, he might want to rob me. That is essentially the doctrine of the inner self as something not open to any possible attack on or invasion of the outer self – a self about which I no longer care, and which indeed may hurtle on through space, governed by the laws of physics, and a plaything of wickedness or blind chance.

In Kant's case this led to certain very important consequences which had a profound influence on Fichte and on all the German Romantic philosophers and thereby on European consciousness generally. Among these is the doctrine that the only thing which is valuable in the universe is a certain state of this true inner spiritual self. Happiness is something which I may or may not get: it is out of my reach. It depends upon too many material circumstances. To say therefore that the human goal is happiness is to doom man to perpetual frustration and self-destruction. The true ideal cannot rest on something which depends on external circumstances; it must depend upon an inner ideal, and the living up to this inner ideal; upon fulfilling something which my true self commands me to do. The true ideal is to obey the laws of morality. If the laws are issued by some outside force, then I am not free, then I am a slave. But if I order myself to do these things, then, as Rousseau had already said, I am no longer a slave, for I control myself; I am the author of my own conduct, and that is freedom.

Kant's profound notion is that what matters, the only thing which is a supreme value for us (and by value one means an end pursued for its own sake, not as a means to something else), the goal which itself justifies everything else and needs no justification in its turn, that for the sake of which we do what we do, and abstain as we abstain, that for the sake of which we act as we act, and, if need be, die – such a sacred, ultimate principle, which governs our conduct, is ordained to us by ourselves. That is why we are free. Therefore, Kant says, the most sacred object in the universe, the only thing which is entirely good, is the good will, that is to say the free, moral, spiritual self within the body.

It is alone sacred, for what else could be sacred, what else could be valuable? I do what I do for the sake of fulfilling the law which I impose upon myself. Utilitarians say that the proper purpose of action is to make as many people happy as possible, and of course, if that is the goal, then it may be possible to sacrifice

human beings, even innocent human beings, for the happiness of the rest. Others again say that I must do that which a sacred text, or a religion, or God has ordained, or do that which the king has ordered me to do, or that which I find myself desiring, or that which my moral system (which I inherit or acquire without questioning it) permits, makes possible.

For Kant this is a kind of blasphemy. For him the only ultimately valuable thing in the universe is the individual human being. To say of a thing that it is valuable is to say that it is an ideal of a human being, something which a human being – as a rational being, he adds – orders himself to do. To what could a human being be sacrificed? Only to something which is superior to, more authoritative, more valuable than, that human being. But nothing can be more valuable than the principle which a human being believes in, for to say of a thing that it is valuable is to say that it is either a means towards, or identical with, something which somebody seeks, for its own sake, wills for its own sake, wills as a rational being.

Kant did talk a great deal about how important it is to emphasise the element of rationality (though what he meant by that has always been very far from clear, at least to some among his students); and he thought that all rational men would therefore necessarily desire the same general kind of conduct. Whether he was right about that or wrong I shall not here ask: that would take us too far afield. What is important to remember in the doctrine is that to say of a thing that it is valuable is to say that it is an ideal for the inner self which must not be impinged upon, must not be ravaged, or enslaved, or exploited, or destroyed, by any outside force. Hence Kant's passionate defence of the individual as the individual. The only thing which is ultimately wrong for him, as it is for Rousseau (though Kant is much more explicit and violent on the subject), is to deprive a human being of the possibility of choice. The only thing which is an ultimate sin is to degrade or humiliate another human being, to treat another

human being as if he were not the author of values; for all that is valuable in the universe is what people honour for its own sake. To deceive somebody, to enslave him, to use another human being as a means for my own ends – this is to say that this other human being's ends are not as rational, as sacred as my own; and this is false, because to say of a thing that it is valuable is to say that it is an end, the end of any rational human being. Hence this passionate doctrine, according to which I must respect other human beings, the only entities in the universe to whom I owe absolute respect, because they are the only beings which create values, fulfil values, the only beings whose activities are that for the sake of which everything else is worth doing, for the sake of which life is worth living, or, if need be, sacrificing.

From this it follows further that morality, moral rules, are not something which I can discover as I can discover factual states of affairs. The whole of the eighteenth century – and not merely the eighteenth century, almost the whole history of philosophy, with the exception of the theology of the Jews and the Christians – insists that moral questions can be answered in the way in which other factual questions can be answered. Indeed, I tried to explain earlier how Helvétius and all his friends preached exactly that. For Kant that is not altogether true, and for his successors it becomes less and less true.

To discover what I ought to do I have to hearken to the inner voice. The voice issues commands, injunctions; preaches ideals which I must live up to. To command, to order, to tell me what to do, to issue what Kant called the categorical imperative, is not to say that something *is* the case. It is no use looking in the outside world for moral goals. Moral goals are not things; moral goals are not states of affairs like a growing tree; they are not facts like the fact that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon. They are orders or commands, and commands are not true or false, they are not something which can be discovered by observation. Commands may be right or wrong, they may be profound or

shallow, they may be wicked or virtuous, they may be intelligible or unintelligible, but they do not *describe* anything. They order, they enjoin and they stimulate.

This is a very important moment in the history of European consciousness. Morality is seen to be not a collection of facts to be discovered by special faculties for discovering moral facts, as many philosophers, from Plato to our own day, have believed to be true; morality is rather something which is ordered, and therefore cannot be discovered. It is invented, not discovered, made, not found. In this respect it becomes akin to artistic creation. Kant, who speaks of objective, universal rules in some sense discovered by the right use of reason, certainly does not draw that quasi-aesthetic conclusion; but he moves us towards it. He believes in universal rational criteria that hold for all men: but his thesis – the language of inner voices – can point elsewhere. By the time we get to the German Romantics of the turn of the century, this becomes more explicit. When the artist creates a work of art, what is it that he does? He obeys some kind of inner impulse, he expresses himself. He creates something in answer to some inner demand, he projects himself, he above all does something, acts in a certain way, behaves in a certain fashion, makes something. He does not learn, discover, deduce, calculate, think.

In the case of previous thinkers, you could say that to discover certain things to be true (for example, that happiness is the true goal of man, or that happiness is not a worthy goal for man; that life is material in character or spiritual in character, or whatever it might be) was achieved in a fashion analogous to that in which Newton discovered the physical laws which the universe obeys. But when an artist creates something, is he discovering? Where is the song before it is sung? Where is the song before it is composed? The song is the singing of the song, or the composing of the song. Where is the picture before it is painted? Especially if the picture is non-representative, as music is non-representative, where is the artist's image of his creation before he creates it? The

act of the artist is a kind of continuous activity, it is a doing of something, and the justification of it is that it is in obedience to some inner impulse. This obedience to the inner impulse is the realisation of an ideal, that for the sake of which he lives, that to which he dedicates himself and which he regards as his mission and his calling.

It is important to remember that, although Kant did not draw this conclusion, he did lay the foundation of such a belief with regard to ethics. It has two central elements. The first is that morality is an *activity*. The French Encyclopedists and the great figures of the German Enlightenment maintained that first we discover the truth in such matters, then we apply our knowledge effectively. But according to this new view morality is not first theory, then practice, but itself a kind of activity. The second element is that this is what is meant by human autonomy. Human autonomy, human independence, means that you are not the prey of some force which you cannot control. I have already quoted Rousseau's dictum that 'The nature of things does not madden us, only ill will does.' But these men fear the force of things even more than the force of persons. Heteronomy, which is the opposite of autonomy, means that I am not independent. I am not independent because I am overcome by passions, because I am overcome by desires or fears or hopes which force me to do various things which I might not, in some deeper sense, wish to do, which I regret afterwards, which I repent of, which I say that, if I were at my best, if I were really I, I would not be doing. Heteronomy means that you are in some way subject to, a slave of, factors over which you have no control. Autonomy is the opposite. Autonomy means that you act as you act because this is your will; *you* are acting – acting, not being acted upon.

This 'you' which is acting is of course not the body, which is prey to every possible physical ill and every possible physical law; it is something else which moves in a free region. 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. This is Rousseau's concept of moral freedom, and it is Kant's. Every human being is such a source of value, and for this reason should be venerated by every other human being. That is why tampering with human beings, 'getting at' them, shaping them, altering them, doing things to them in the name of principles which are objective (that is, outside – valid independently of – human wills), in the way in which Helvétius wanted to do things to them in the name of happiness, is forbidden. That is why all that counts is *motive*. The execution of the plan I am not responsible for, since that is something in which physical laws intervene. I cannot be responsible for doing something of which I am not in control. 'Ought' implies 'can' – if you cannot do something, you cannot be told that you ought to do it. Therefore, if I have duties, if there is a morality, if there are ends, if there are certain things which I ought to do, and others which I ought to avoid, they must be in some region which can be completely free from outside interference. That is why it cannot be my duty to seek happiness, for happiness is out of my control. My duty can be only that which I can wholly control, not the achievement, but the attempt – the setting myself to do what I deem right. I am free only in the fastness of my own inner self.

Certain consequences sprang from this view which had very considerable political effects. The first, immediate effect was a kind of quietism. If all that a man should be promoting is his own inner moral self-protection, if the only thing which counts is the motive, if all that a man can be responsible for is his own personal integrity, that he be honest, that he be truthful, that he at any rate does not cheat, then, whatever may happen to the outside world – the economic and political sphere, the region

of material bodies in space liable to be interfered with by outside factors, whether physical or not – all that should be outside the realm of proper moral activity. This is, indeed, how Fichte, in his earlier period, thinks.[1]

Fichte maintained that the individual must be absolutely free. 'I am wholly my own creation,' he says; and 'I do not accept the law of what nature offers me because I must, I believe it because I will.'*[2] He says that the important thing is not *das Gegebene* (that which is given) but *das Aufgegebene* (that which is imposed upon me, that which is my duty, that which is ordained, that which is part of my mission). Fichte declares that this law is not itself drawn from the realm of fact, but from our own self, the pure, original form of the self, which is, he says, the creating, the shaping, the forming of things in the outside world according to my ideas and aims, for it is only then that I am their master, that they must serve me.* Hence springs the romantic notion that the most important thing in the world is integrity, dedication.

This is so important an idea that I should like to linger a little on it. In all previous ages of man – since Plato at least – the person who was admired, the person who was looked up to, was the sage. The sage was a man who knew how to live. Some people thought the sage was in contact with God, and that God told him what to do and what the truth was. Some thought the sage was somebody in a laboratory – Paracelsus or Dr Faustus – or again someone who discovered these things by means other than empirical investigation, by some sort of intuitive grasp, by a special insight. Morality was like other forms of knowledge, a process of discovery of certain truths; and the most important thing to aim at was to be in a position to know these truths. If

[1] But gradually another thought comes stealing over this original one: that man is not an isolated being, that man is what he is because he is made by society. Here perhaps the German philosopher Herder, about whom I say something later, had a considerable influence on him.

[2] [For the meaning of the asterisks in this chapter see 275.]

you could not perceive them for yourself, you consulted a specialist; and to be a specialist was admired. The prophet, the seer, the scientist, the philosopher, or whoever it might be, was the person to look up to, because he was the person who knew how to do things, because he knew what the universe was like. The chemist might one day be able to change base metals into gold or discover the elixir of life. The political expert was somebody who knew how to govern because he understood the psychology and physiology of human nature, and of society, and knew enough about the general constitution of the universe to be able to adapt his skill thereto. The person one admired and looked up to was the man who got things right, who could discover the correct answer, who knew.

There will be cases where it is necessary not merely to live for the sake of obtaining these goals that you want, in the light of the knowledge which you have, but also to die for them. Christian martyrs died; but what they died for was the truth. They died because they desired, by their example and by their testimony, to witness to those truths, that knowledge, that wisdom which had been vouchsafed to them or to the people in whom they trusted. But the mere act of self-sacrifice, the mere act of dying for your conviction, the mere act of immolating yourself to some inner ideal because it happens to be your ideal and nobody else's – that was not hitherto admired. If a Muslim were brave and died for his faith, you did not spit upon his corpse, you did not mock him. You admired his courage and resolution; you thought it was the greatest of pities that a man so brave, and perhaps naturally so good, should die for so absurd a set of beliefs. But you did not admire him for his dedication to those beliefs.

By the time we get to the early nineteenth century all this has changed. We find that what is admired is *idealism* as such. But what is meant by idealism? An idealist is a person who throws away everything that might attract baser natures – wealth, power, success, popularity – for the sake of serving his inner

ideal, for the sake of creating that which his inner self dictates. This is the ideal hero of German romanticism, and of its disciples, Carlyle, Michelet and, in their youth, the Russian radicals. The great artistic figure of the nineteenth century, who impressed himself deeply upon the imagination of Europe, was Beethoven. Beethoven is visualised as a man in a garret, poor, unkempt, neglected, rough, ugly; he has thrown away the world, he will have none of its wealth, and although the rewards are offered, he rejects them. He rejects them in order to fulfil himself, in order to serve the inner vision, in order to express that which demands, with an absolute imperative force, that it be expressed. The worst thing that a man can do is to 'sell out', to betray an ideal. That alone is despicable – despicable because the only thing which makes life worth living (to go back to Kant), the only thing which makes values values, which makes some things right and others wrong, the only thing which can justify conduct, is this inner vision.

The important thing about this attitude, which reaches its height in the early nineteenth century, is that it is no longer relevant, indeed it no longer means much, to ask whether what these people are seeking is true or false.[1] What you admire is a man who hurls himself against the walls of life, who fights against immense odds without asking himself whether the result will be victory or death, and who does this because he cannot act otherwise. The favoured image is that of Luther: there he stands, he cannot move, because he serves his inner ideal. That is what is meant by integrity, devotion, self-fulfilment, self-direction; that is what is meant by being an artist, a hero, a sage and even a good man.

This is quite novel. Mozart and Haydn would have been exceedingly surprised if what was valued in them was an inner

[1] Kant spoke about reason and gave certain criteria for determining the difference between false and true moral commandments. But by the time we get to the nineteenth century this is no longer operative.

spiritual impulse; they were artists who produced musical works which were beautiful, and these works were commissioned by patrons and admired by audiences because they were beautiful. They were craftsmen who made things: they were not priests, they were not prophets, they were purveyors. Some purvey tables, others purvey symphonies; and if the symphonies are good symphonies, still more if they are works of genius, then the persons who write them are, or should be, admired.

By the time we get to the nineteenth century the artist becomes a hero and the act of defiance becomes the central act of his life. You defy the powerful, the rich, the wicked, the philistines, and the dry and critical and mean-spirited intelligentsia if need be – all the people against whom Rousseau hurled his early thunderbolts, followed by Carlyle and Nietzsche and D. H. Lawrence. You defy these people in order to assert yourself, say your word, be something autonomous, not be at the mercy of, guided by, conditioned by, things or circumstances other than those which you create out of your own inner self.

So long as it is confined to artists this is a noble ideal which no one today publicly spurns; indeed the moral consciousness of today is largely moulded by these romantic notions, in terms of which we admire idealists and men of integrity, whether we agree with their ideals or not, sometimes even when we think them foolish, in a way in which in the eighteenth century and in previous centuries they were not admired at all, and thought lovable but silly.* But it has a more sinister side to it. Morality now becomes something which is not found but invented; morality is not a set of propositions corresponding to certain facts which we discover in nature. Indeed, nature is nothing to do with it; nature for Kant, nature for Fichte, is simply a collection of dead matter upon which you impose your will. We have departed far indeed from the notion of copying nature, following nature – *naturam sequi* – being like nature. On the contrary, now you mould nature, you transform nature; nature is a challenge,

nature is simply the raw material. If this is so, if morality consists in projecting yourself in some way, it may be that political activity is also a kind of self-projection. Napoleon, who projects his personality across the map of Europe, who moulds human beings in France, in Germany, in Italy, in Russia, as the artist moulds his material, as the composer moulds sound and the painter colours – Napoleon is the highest expression of morality,[1] for he is expressing his personality, he is asserting himself, he is serving the inner ideal which drives him on and on.

At this point there is a quantum leap in Fichte's thought – from the isolated individual to the group as a true subject or self. How does this arise?

I am free only if I do things which nobody can stop me from doing, and I do this only if it is my inner self which is active, not impinged upon by anything else.* A self is a spirit, but it is not an isolated spirit, and it is here that Fichte begins on that path which leads to such peculiar conclusions, that path which begins to move towards the notion that selves are not individual human beings at all, that the self is something to do with society, that perhaps the self, the human self, is really not only itself the product of history and of tradition, but also bound to other human beings by Burke's myriad indissoluble spiritual links, that it exists only as part of a general pattern, of which it forms an element. So much so that it becomes misleading to say that a self is an empirical individual born in a certain year, living a certain kind of life, in a certain physical environment, and dying in a certain place at a certain date.

Fichte begins to move towards a theological conception of the self; he says that the true, free self is not the empirical self which is clothed in a body and has a date and a place,* it is a self which is common to all bodies, it is a superself, it is a larger, divine self

[1] Though not, as it happens, for Fichte, who had a particular hatred for Napoleon as a false artist, alien to spiritual values.

which he gradually begins to identify now with nature, now with God, now with history, now with a nation.[1]

Starting with the notion of the isolated individual who serves some inner ideal which is out of reach of nature or the tyrant, Fichte gradually adopts the idea that the individual himself is nothing, 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.

It begins innocently enough. The individual man must endeavour to repay his debt to society. He must take his place among men, he must strive in some respect to advance the rest of humanity, which has done so much for him. 'Man', he says, 'becomes man only among other men.' And again: 'Man is destined to live in society; he must do so; he is not a complete human being, he contradicts his own nature, if he lives in isolation.'*

Fichte gradually came to believe something of this kind. But he goes much further. The real self of Fichte's fully developed philosophy is not you, nor I, nor any particular individual, nor any particular group of individuals. It is that which is common to all men; it is a personified, embodied principle which, like a pantheistic divinity, expresses itself through finite centres, through me, through you, through other people. Its embodiment on earth is the true society, conceived as a collection of persons bound together metaphysically, like small flames issuing from some great central fire. It is the great central fire towards which

[1] There is a peculiar, special process of metaphysical insight which only a few chosen men in each generation – in particular Fichte himself – can use for the purpose of discovering what is the duty of man, given to this special active insight, the free self within me, the self which a tyrant cannot reach, which alone is free. To go through this process is for Fichte analogous to the procedure of the ancient mystics, the ancient seers and prophets who felt themselves in the presence of something greater than themselves, greater than their physical selves, greater than their empirical selves – in the presence of some vast power: God, nature, the real self.

each flame tends in the process of being aware of the moral orders – which are impulsions, flamelike strivings – of its inner self.* This is a theological doctrine, and Fichte clearly was in this sense a theologian, and so was Hegel, and no good purpose is served by supposing that they were secular thinkers. They were deeply influenced by the Christian tradition, and it might seem to some that they were heretics in it. But theologians they were, far more theological than what is called philosophical at the present time.

In this way Fichte gradually moves from the group to the notion that the true person, the true individual, whose act of self-assertion is the march of morality in history – the imposition of moral imperatives upon a pliant, flexible nature – this individual is not even the human being at his most self-conscious, but a collectivity: race, nation, mankind.* This was the substance of those celebrated speeches of his to the German nation delivered in Berlin in 1807–8, at a time when the troops of Napoleon were occupying the city, in which he told the Germans to arise and resist. Let me quote from these to show the kind of thing he had in mind, and how far he must have travelled. Fichte is speaking of the German character, and he says that there are two kinds of characters in the world:

> Either you believe in an original principle in man – in a freedom, a perfectibility and infinite progress of our species – or you believe in none of this. You may even have a feeling or intuition of the opposite. All those who have within them a creative quickening of life, or else, assuming that such a gift has been withheld from them, at least reject what is but vanity and await the moment when they are caught up by the torrent of original life, or even if they are not yet at this point, at any rate have some confused presentiment of freedom, those who have towards it not hatred, nor fear, but a feeling of love – all these are part of the primal humanity, and considered as a people they constitute the primal people. In short, the people. I mean the German people. All those,

> on the other hand, who have resigned themselves to represent only derivative, second-hand products, who think of themselves in this way, these become in effect such and shall pay the price of their belief. They are only an annex to life. Not for them those pure springs which flowed before them, which still flow around them; they are but the echo coming back from a rock of a voice which is silent. Considered as a people, they are excluded from the primal people, they are strangers, outsiders. A nation which to this day bears the name of German (or simply the people) has not ceased to give evidence of a creative and original activity in most diverse fields. The hour has come at last when philosophy, penetrated through and through by self-awareness, will hold to this nation a mirror wherein it will recognise itself with a clear perception, and at the same time will become quite clearly aware of the mission of which it has hitherto had but a confused premonition, but which nature herself has imposed upon that nation; an unmistakable call has been addressed to it today to labour in freedom calmly and clearly and to perfect itself according to the notions which it has framed of itself, to accomplish the duty which has been outlined to it.
>
> And everyone who believes this kind of thing will join with these people whose function, whose mission, is to create. All those who believe on the contrary in an arrested being, or in retrogression or in cycles of history; or else those who put an inanimate nature at the helm of the world, whatever be their native country, whatever be their language, they are not Germans, they are strangers to us and one should hope they will be utterly cut off from our people.

Then the great paean begins, the great nationalist chauvinist cry. Individual self-determination now becomes collective self-realisation, and the nation a community of unified wills in pursuit of moral truth. But this collective march forward would be directionless if the nation were not led, if it were not illuminated by

the quasi-divine leadership of the *Zwingherr*. Fichte says, 'What we need is a leader; what we need is a man to mould us.' 'Hither!' – he suddenly cries – 'Zwingherr zur Deutschheit [the man who will compel us to Germanism]. We hope, of course, that it will be our king who will perform this service, but be he who he may we must await him till he comes and moulds us, till he comes and makes us.'

In short, we have come full circle. We started with the notion of an autonomous person, anxious not to be impinged upon, wishing for a life of absolute freedom, obeying only the inner workings of its own inner consciousness, of its own inner conscience. And now we say: Life is art, life is a moulding, life is the creation of something – self-creation – by a so-called 'organic' process.* There are superior beings and there are inferior beings, as there is within me a higher and a lower nature, and I can rise to great heights in a moment of crisis, and crush my passions and desires and perform heroic acts of self-immolation in the name of a principle which raises me; which, as he says, catches me up in a flow of life. If I can suppress that which is lower in me, then the leader or the race can suppress that which is lower in it, as the spirit does the sinning flesh.

Here it is at last, the famous and fatal analogy between the individual and the nation, the organic metaphor which leaves the field of theological imagery and is secularised by Burke and by Rousseau, and is very powerful in Fichte. Fichte contrasts *compositum*, which is a mere artificial combination, and *totum*, which is a total nation, which is something organic, single, whole, and in which the higher principle dominates, the higher principle which may take the shape of a great nation, or of history.* And the greatest agent of this force is a divine conqueror or leader whose business it is to play upon his nation as an artist plays upon his instrument, to mould it into a single organic whole, as the painter, the sculptor moulds his materials, as the composer creates patterns of sound.

As for freedom, individual freedom and individual conscience, and right and wrong, whether discovered or invented, what has become of those now? What of that individual freedom of which we spoke earlier, which the British and the French writers defended, the freedom of each man to be allowed, within certain limits at least, to live as he likes, to waste his time as he likes, to go to the bad in his own way, to do that which he wants simply because freedom as such is a sacred value? Individual freedom, which in Kant has a sacred value, has for Fichte become a choice made by something superpersonal. It chooses me, I do not choose it, and acquiescence is a privilege, a duty, a self-lifting, a kind of self-transcendent rising to a higher level. Freedom, and morality generally, is self-submission to the superself – the dynamic cosmos. We are back with the view that freedom *is* submission.

Fichte himself largely thought in terms of some transcendental, idealistic willpower which had relatively little to do with the actual terrestrial life of men, and only towards the end of his life did he perceive the possibility of moulding earthly life in conformity with these transcendental desires. But his followers translated it into more mundane terms. The transfer of emphasis from reason to will created that notion of freedom which is not the notion of non-interference, not the notion of permitting each man to have his choice, but the notion of self-expression, the notion of imposing yourself upon the medium, the notion of freedom as the removal of obstacles to yourself. One can remove obstacles only by subjugating them: in mathematics, by understanding; in material life, by acquisition; in politics, by conquest. That is at the heart of the notion that a free nation is a victorious nation, that freedom is power and that conquest and freedom are one.

To show what this has led to, let me quote a very shrewd observer, the German poet Heinrich Heine, then living in Paris. These were the lines which he wrote in 1834 in an attempt to warn the French not to minimise the force of ideas:

> The idea tries to become action, the word desires to be made flesh, and lo, a man […] has only to express his thought, and the world forms itself […] The world is but the outer manifestation of the word.
>
> Note this, you proud men of action, you are nothing but the unconscious tools of the men of thought, who in humble stillness have often drawn up your most definite plans of action. Maximilien Robespierre was nothing but the hand of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the bloodstained hand that drew from the womb of time the body whose soul Rousseau had created. […] the *Critique of Pure Reason* by Kant […] is the sword with which deism was beheaded […].

Fichte was once well paraphrased by the American philosopher Josiah Royce thus: 'The world is the poem […] dreamed out by the inner life.' So, then, our worlds are literally different if we differ spiritually. A composer, a banker, a robber literally create their worlds. Whether or not he was thinking of this, Heine feels genuine terror before this attitude, and had a genuine vision of doom to come: 'Kantians will appear, who in the world of mere phenomena hold nothing sacred, and ruthlessly with sword and axe will hack through the foundations of our European life, and pull up the past by its last remaining roots. Armed Fichteans will come, whose fanatical wills neither fear nor self-interest can touch.' These men, these pantheists, will fight recklessly for their principles, for these principles are absolute, and their dangers seem to them purely illusory. *Naturphilosophen* will identify themselves with elemental forces, which are always destructive. Then the god Thor will wield his gigantic hammer and smash the Gothic cathedrals. Christianity was the only force which held back the ancient German barbarism with its naked violence; once that talisman is broken a terrible cataclysm will break out. 'Don't try [he says to the French] to suppress or to extinguish the flame, you will only burn your fingers.'

Above all, don't laugh at the dreamy poet and his revolutionary fancies.

> Thought precedes action as lightning precedes thunder. German thunder too is a German, and not in a hurry, and it comes rolling slowly onward; but come it will, and once you hear it crashing, as nothing ever crashed before in the history of the world, then know that the German thunder has finally hit the mark. At that sound the eagles will fall dead from the air and the lions in the remotest deserts of Africa will […] creep to their royal lairs. A drama will be performed in Germany in contrast with which the French Revolution will seem a mere peaceful idyll.

The French are warned not to clap this great gladiatorial show, which will begin in Germany. 'For you', he says to them, 'liberated Germany is more dangerous than the whole Holy Alliance, with all its Cossacks and its Croats. For […] we Germans forget nothing', and pretexts for war will be found. The French are warned, above all, not to disarm. Remember, he says to them, that upon Olympus, 'amidst the nude deities who feast upon nectar and ambrosia, there is one goddess who amidst all this merriment and peace keeps her armour and her helmet and a spear in her hand – the goddess of wisdom'.

This prophecy was destined to be fulfilled. It is idle to blame any one thinker, any one philosopher, for the actions of multitudes in history. Nevertheless it is odd to reflect that there is a direct line, and a very curious one, between the extreme liberalism of Kant, with his respect for human nature and its sacred rights, and Fichte's identification of freedom with self-assertion, with the imposition of your will upon others, with the removal of obstacles to your desires, and finally with a victorious nation marching to fulfil its destiny in answer to the internal demands given to it by transcendental reason, before which all material things must crumble. We have indeed travelled a long way from the Anglo-French notion of freedom which allowed each man

his own circle, that small but indispensable vacuum within which he can do as he pleases, go to the bad or go to the good, choose for the sake of choosing, in which the value of choice as such is regarded as sacred.

These are the two notions of liberty which were spread over Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century; to ask which of them is true, and which of them is false, is a shallow and unanswerable question. They represent two views of life of an irreconcilable kind, the liberal and authoritarian, open and closed, and the fact that the word 'freedom' has been a genuinely central symbol in both is at once remarkable and sinister.