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Isaiah Berlin on Morality, Determinism and Freedom: An Interview

K. J. O'Meara

One of the more frequently discussed Political Theorists and Historians of Ideas from the 20th Century is Sir Isaiah Berlin. Instantly recognisable for his style of glasses, pipe and baldness, Berlin is usually remembered for his 'Two Concepts of Liberty', differentiating 'Negative Freedom' - as non-intervention - and 'Positive Freedom' - as the capacity to achieve human potential, alongside his 'Value Pluralism'.ⁱ Despite his continued connection to the British Intellectual Liberalism of the last century, Berlin, like many of his contemporaries, was occupied with thinking, reading and educating about the relationship between science, modernism, ethics, history, ideology and determinism. In 1974, Sir Isaiah Berlin (**IB**) was interviewed by John Merson (**JM**) - broadcast on ABC Radio National's The Philosopher's Zone with Alan Saunders in 2009 - in which his thoughts on precisely this relationship were laid out in his typically fluid and perspicuous style.ⁱⁱ The following is a transcript of that interview, beginning with Berlin's thoughts on Kant and moral action.

IB: Kant was very deeply convinced that there is such a thing as moral action. Moral action means that a man chooses, or can choose, to do right as opposed to wrong. To put it in very simple terms. And there was no merit in choosing what was right unless there was a possibility of choosing what was wrong. And if man was totally determined, not only by external factors - biological or physical - but also by what might be called internal factors, psychological for example - his desires, his wishes, his inclinations - then according to Kant, he was a mere 'turnspit' as he called him.¹ He was like a clock, which of course, moves in a perfectly regular fashion, but not determined by itself, but determined by some mechanism over which it has no control.

What he was really opposed to was Spinoza's idea, that a stone, which is flung by somebody, if you ask it why it is flying where it is flying, supposing it were conscious of what it was doing, might answer that it was doing so because it wanted to.² But in fact, it can't help it. It's really the thrower who determines its direction. For Kant this cancelled morality altogether. He thought this is true of the physical world, but if it was true of the moral world then goodbye to morals. For him morality consisted in the power of choice.

JM: *This does raise a very interesting question though, doesn't it, when you deal with those who are considered to be criminally insane; that is, they are mad-bad, and therefore curable, and those people who are just bad, who are just criminals, are seen to be responsible for their actions, and therefore are punished for those actions.*

¹ Immanuel Kant (2002) *Critique of Practical Reason*, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Inc., (5:97), p. 123.

² Baruch Spinoza (1995) "58. Spinoza to Schuller [October 1674]", in Samuel Shirley et.al. (Eds.), *The Letters*, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Inc., pp. 283-287, p. 284.

IB: I don't know whether if you're considered to be totally incurable, then of course you are more or less regarded as a kind of medical object. Whether you're put in jail or in hospital, I think that isn't quite perhaps the division which one ought to draw. The division is between people who think, whose acts are supposed to be caused by environment, by bad education, by other factors which can be adjusted by a kindly and wise psychologist, or sociologist, as it were, and acts which are regarded as, in some sense, free for which the man is responsible. And the whole notion of responsibility is at stake.

Kant, whom I've mentioned already, took a very extreme position about this. He thought that punishment was fundamentally retributive, which is now regarded as the most brutal and irrational position by many liberal-minded and progressive thinkers.³ He thought that because he thought that the idea that punishment is corrective, or the idea that punishment is educational in character and alters your character, is insulting to the man himself. In some sense, the corrector, the psychologist, is regarded as a man who knows what is good for the man which he himself does not. And therefore, he's being treated like a sick man or a child. This may be required in some cases, where you are dealing with children, that's to say un-grown-up people, who are not fully aware of the facts, who are in some way not adult, or perhaps people who are very aberrant - that's to say, who are psychologically, in some way, as we would say, pathological or abnormal. But to regard all human beings as being in that condition appears to him to deny what he regards as the most human of all human attributes, which is the power of free choice. And he says, in effect, that generosity, for example, and paternalism, even used for the most noble purposes, can be an insult to man, can be a terrible form of tyranny.⁴ That indifference, even hostility, recognizes the equality of the person towards whom you're hostile or about whom you're indifferent, more deeply than the attempt to condition him, to mould him, to do something to him which he's regarded as being incapable of doing himself.

I mean, I've known people who've committed antisocial acts who are quite clear about the fact that they'd rather go to prison than to hospital. To go to prison means that at least they know there is a punishment attached, and they've done it all the same. They know perfectly well that society is against it, they maybe agreed with the laws of society and defy them openly, or they may disagree with them and the laws are immoral or wicked. But at least they know what they're doing, they do things with their eyes open, as opposed to being sent to hospital – the implication of which is that they are, in some way, psychologically feeble, inferior, to understand the world less well than the people who are in charge of them.

³ Immanuel Kant (1996) *Kant: The Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, §49E.

⁴ "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* (*imperium paternale*), the subjects, as immature children who cannot distinguish what is truly harmful to themselves, would be obliged to behave purely passively and to rely on the judgement on the head of state as to how they *ought* to be happy, and upon his kindness in willing their happiness at all. Such a government is the greatest conceivable *despotism*." - Immanuel Kant (1991) "On the Common Saying: 'This May Be True in Theory, but it Does Not Apply in Practice'", in H.S. Reiss (Ed.), *Kant: Political Writings*, 2nd Edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 61-92, p.74.

JM: *Would this be true of homosexuals particularly?*

IB: Yes, and while there were anti-homosexual laws in England, certainly some homosexuals I've met were proud people who said they knew what they were doing, and they would rather be punished than treated as pathological cases.

JM: *How often do you think this argument about human nature, that is, a collection of people sit down and decide 'this is human nature', 'this is what we can expect from man'. On the side you have what is natural for man and you have what is unnatural. So, to be homosexual, to come under a heading of any number of aberrations, you are unnatural, to be cured, to be coerced into 'naturalness'.*

IB: Well, of course, one must begin by saying that some very dogmatic and some very crude views of human nature have been held and have done a great deal of damage. If you thought diabolical possession was important, as you did in the Middle Ages, then when people behaved in perhaps hysterical fashion, they were beaten.⁵ They were beaten and they were maltreated in order to drive the devils out of them. It took some time for people to realize that perhaps the causes of such behaviour, whatever they might be, were not supernatural in character, and therefore the treatment advocated by religious persons were mere cruelty.

But, at the same time, I have to say all moral theories and all political theories rest on some view of human nature. In the end it boils down to that. When you compare this morality to that morality, this moral philosopher to that moral philosopher, or this society to that society, if you research sufficiently, scrupulously and deeply, you will find that there is some concept of human nature that underlies it. And there have been several concepts which have clashed with each other. For example, in the ancient world, and in the medieval world, the Judeo-Christian world so to speak, and indeed the Ancient Greek world too, it was assumed that all things had purposes. Inanimate objects, animate objects, men, all had some kind of inbuilt purposes. If you were a theist you believed that God created you for a certain purpose. If you are not a theist, you talked of nature, not necessarily as creating, but being filled with objects with certain purposes. The great thing was to discover 'what is the purpose of a stone'; 'the purpose of a stone is to gravitate downwards'. For Aristotle, every object seeks its natural end - and that's called 'teleology'.⁶ If you think everything has a proper purpose, then you say, full realisation of an object or a person is the attainment of that particular end, and that's what makes people happy.

Why are people miserable? Because they don't understand their ends, and they try and do something for which they are not adapted. I am a violin player and I try to play the flute. That's no good. I wish to construct a violin. I try and make it out of stone. It will not yield because I don't

⁵ 'Diabolical Possession' is commonly referred to as 'Demonic Possession', whereby it is believed an evil spirit or demon has possessed the body of an individual.

⁶ Aristotle (2013) *The Metaphysics*, Mineola: NY: Dover Publishing Inc.; (1996) *Physics*, Oxford: OUP. For more information on Aristotle's notion of teleology, see: Monte Ransome Johnson (2005) *Aristotle on Teleology*, Oxford: OUP.

understand the purposes of stones, the purposes of violins, or my own purpose as a player. And this of course is also the Christian Idea of a kind of hierarchy, in which God is at the head and perhaps an amebae below, and there is a whole hierarchy of beings, each of which seeks to attain its own purpose and if they all attain their purposes, they're in harmony with each other. Disharmony arises when people wander away from their purpose, through error, through blindness, through perversity of some sort, through misfortune sometimes, perhaps. And then they have to be put right, adjusted, put into their proper bracket and then it's all right. And people like Hume, who was highly empirical, still believed something not unlike that. He thought there was a nature, Mistress Nature, Dame Nature, which always came to one's aid when one was, in some way, distempered.

Hobbes, did not believe this, on the whole. Spinoza didn't believe it. This was a great break, the idea that things didn't have ends. That only people who have ends are men who make things for certain purposes. Clocks don't have ends; the end is imposed by me. Men don't have inbuilt ends; they simply seek what they seek. When they are rational, they seek rational ends. And if they're irrational, they seek irrational ends. If you understand what the world is like, you will see what is likely to accomplish your ends, what is likely to fulfil them, and what is likely to frustrate them. But there is a terrible and complete contrast with people that think there are objective ends built into things and men, and people who say things are what they are, they're simply a mechanism; they just exist and are casually determined. And ends are things which human beings just conceive and can abandon.

JM: *Where is freedom though? Where is the sense that man is a self-actualising entity? This is the Sartre argument isn't it?*

Well, certainly it is. That of course is what Kant is in favour of, that's where it comes from. It comes from Kant, Fichte and these German philosophers for the most part, though there were people in the ancient world, Epicurus I think, probably thought that we were free in some way. All determinist theorists flow from the Stoics, and all Libertarian theories flow from Epicureans, historically speaking. You see the Stoics were the first people who saw the dilemma, the awful agony. They were the first people who, on the one hand, believed that there were certain things people had to do. I don't say they called them duties, but things which were proper for men to do, and therefore had to choose. On the other hand, they also believed in rigorous causality, and they didn't know how to get out of this. They were the first people to be in this bind. And one of them then says, well, we can solve it this way. We can say men are involved in this; they're not just pushed about by external causes. If a sphere rolls down an incline, the fact that it rolled down the incline is due not merely to the incline, but also to the fact it is spherical. When men act in certain ways, it isn't only that they're being pushed by external causes, it is also that they have a certain character, that they're involved – their nature. They're involved in it. If they're involved in it they're free.

Kant rejects this absolutely – said this was a miserable subterfuge. Either you are determined or you are not. The fact you were determined by your own nervous system or by your own emotions, or

by your own desires, didn't make you any freer. But he, and people like Sartre, certainly supposed that this whole metaphysical notion of everything being rigorously determined, whether by empirical causality or by some kind of metaphysical structure, was simply something which human beings invented, at least for Sartre, in order to justify all kinds of acts which they fundamentally suppose not to be right.⁷

JM: *Also, it seems that it does justify the structure of society as well, very nicely. If you have a hierarchy, a concept that everybody has their place, that human nature, God, or whatever it is, history, has determined that people will have a particular function, then you have your people at the top and your people in graduated classes down to the very bottom. Now this does form a very good justification for injustice, inequalities, and things of this sort.*

IB: Well, and perhaps for justice too, in some cases. But the thing is, that it's cosier that way. If you aren't fully responsible for your own acts, if you can say 'I am as I am because my parents maltreated me', 'I am as I am because the nature of the universe is such', and then you put the responsibility on the back of the universe, and shuffle it off your own. And this, ultimately, people don't want to be all alone, to be lonely persons responsible for their own actions, they want some justification for what they do, from the nature of something greater, more stable, in a way, grander than themselves. And if they can say 'I fulfil the will of God', or 'I fulfil the will of history', or 'I fulfil the will of my class', or 'I understand myself to be a member of a certain economic stratum', let us say, 'which I didn't choose, but with which I'm deeply bound up, which I cannot, in a sense, help, and don't want to help, because that's what I am'.

JM: *In this sense, really, the sociologists are right to a degree, aren't they, that in fact, many of the ideas, probably the majority of our ideas are formed to justify, to rationalize, the functions which we have in society. That is, they're thrown up by society, they're not uniquely divined notions that an individual arrives at, but they are ideas which are formulated by the society in order that the individuals will be able to act. And that the ideas come, in a sense, after the action and don't precede it.*

IB: Well, there's obviously much truth in this. And I don't think it's done consciously. I don't think this justifying activity is done by a lot of unscrupulous knaves who simply throw dust in people's eyes in order to make them do what they want them to do, although Voltaire thought something like that. I dare say there have been cases of that. But, broadly speaking, what one can say is ideas are not born in the void. Ideas are not born of ideas. There's no parthenogenesis among ideas. Ideas are, to a large extent, the products of the social process. I'd be the last person to deny that.

Take for example nationalism, which is one of the most rampant ideas at present in the world. Who can deny? Well, this is, to a high degree, the product, for example, of, I suppose, humiliation on

⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre (1967) *Of Human Freedom*, New York: Philosophy Library; (2006) *Being and Nothingness*, Abingdon: Routledge.

the part of the weak by the strong, which ultimately leads to a backlash, which ultimately leads to a kind of, what Schiller and other people have called 'the bent twig theory'.⁸ If you bend a twig too far, it lashes back. Well, I don't think they're conscious of that. I think if you talk about nationalists, they don't say: 'we've been humiliated, we've been pushed aside, we've not been given our place in the sun and that's why we feel so resentful. We are poor and we hate the rich because we're poor, we have been weak and that's why we hate the strong, because we're weak'. They just feel these emotions, which are undoubtedly caused in them by some kind of socio-psychological process.

JM: *In a sense, then, we are determined?*

IB: To a large degree. To begin with of course, let us admit one thing: a lot of things which were regarded as free in the past are now seen to be conditioned by external circumstances, and we've become, in that sense, more enlightened and if you like more forgiving in an anti-Kantian sort of way. People were blamed for doing all kinds of things which can now be seen they probably can't help because of bad education or because of terrible social pressures.

JM: *But is there a danger of Swinging in the other direction too far?*

IB: Yes, I would say there was. Nevertheless, if you exaggerate this and make it absolutely total then you have a picture of totally mouldable, malleable men who can be turned into almost anything, which is rather what the 18th century French philosophers believed. And that really does deny any meaning to a very large number of moral terms, which you'd then have to shed. We'd have to transform our concepts and language in very drastic ways to meet that.

Take for example the phrase: 'Serve him right'. For someone like Skinner, this is a meaningless phrase.⁹ What does he mean, 'Serve him right'? A man digs a hole for his enemy to fall into and falls into it himself. People feel some satisfaction about this and say, 'Serve him right', quite right. Poetic justice. Here is a villain which means nothing but harm to a lot of people and one of the traps which he sets for other people actually catches him. Why do we feel satisfaction at this? Not just at the fact that a bad man has been eliminated, we feel he deserves punishment. The idea of desert is a very obscure idea. If you begin talking about desert, I think you must somewhat abandon the idea of complete determination. Desert means you could've acted otherwise, in which case you would've been all right, but you chose freely to do this and that's why you don't deserve to be treated in this or that way. Desert

⁸ This is a phrase that Berlin usually attributed to Schiller, once to Diderot. Despite this, scholars have been unable to find this metaphor in the work of either thinker. The metaphor of the bent twig being re-straightened does actually occur in Plekhanov's *Essays in the History of Materialism*. However, Plekhanov's meaning is different from Berlin's, more than likely attaching Plekhanov's phrase to Schiller's view of nationalism and, as such, misattributing 'the bent twig theory' to Schiller or Diderot. For more information on this point, see: George Crowder (2004) *Isiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 202.

⁹ B. F. Skinner (1965) *Science and Human Behaviour*, New York: The Free Press; (2002) *Beyond Free Will and Dignity*, Indiana, IN: Hackett Publishing Company Ltd.

implies the possibility of free choice as a central factor, as a central element in human experience. Action as something which is not fully determined.

JM: *The problem though is that when you have a concept of our being determined; that is, the Skinner argument, that is, the fact we can know that some all-knowing, omniscient psychiatrist or behavioural therapist can sort of have us taped, that in a way we are undermined. That if society can say 'Yes we can help you, we can cure you of all the problems', there is that sense in which you undermine the important ingredient out of which freedom seems to arise, and that is autonomy. Now the question is, in a general notion of human nature, and also in our social institutions; do you think this concept of autonomy is being lost?*

IB: Well, in totalitarian and authoritarian societies, of course. His is really in a way stimulated by these doctrines, but the doctrines are symptomatic of an attitude that men are malleable, wholly malleable, that they are made as they are by certain external factors, but then I can interfere with these factors by substituting my own factors. And that I can really turn a human being into practically anything I choose within certain limits. And this, of course, gives enormous power to the conditioners, and entails a high degree of not only malleability but makes it possible for people to become victims of no-doubt ill-intentioned, or mad, power-seeking, or other power-loving and power-using persons.

That's what of course Kant protested against. He thought paternalism was a terrible tyranny, even when a paternalist ruler or conditioner is very benevolent, because the implication is: 'You don't understand yourself, I as a psychiatrist do, I understand both myself and you. You understand neither yourself nor me. You resist because you don't understand. I must therefore somehow break your resistance. I'm kindly and I don't propose to do this by brutal means, but I shall do it all the same. I know what is good for you and you do not. I shall therefore make you happy, whether you want to be happy or not, in the only way people can be made happy, which I happen to know because I've studied the subject and I know all the factors involved. When you are happy, when I've finished with you, you will respectively be grateful to me for having done to you what at the time you resisted.'

Now, in the case of children, we do do that a little bit. I mean, we send children to school, although they may of course resist, because we say: 'They must be taught to be adult, they must be able to cope with the universe. They won't unless I do. And when they have grown up, they'll see that I acted rightly'. But to treat large populations as if they were childish, as if they were un-adult, that is of course the case against imperialism. A large number of imperialists were benevolently motivated. They thought: 'Here are the poor natives, here are we – civilised people. We can't listen to what they want, what they want is neither here nor there, it's what we know is good for them. Never mind what they think'. This does open the doors to the most fearful tyranny, not less tyrannous because sometimes it's used by people full of goodwill, and full of Skinnerian conviction.

JM: *To sum up then, how do you think that notion like there being a human nature; how do you think these have formulated the ideologies of our time?*

IB: Let me make it absolutely plain. I think that rational, scientific attitudes are entirely good. That the more we know the better. The only way in which we can lead sane and happy, and if you like 'moral' lives, is by understanding ourselves as well as possible. Anything which makes for self-understanding is a good thing. But of course, you can not only misinterpret, you can use scientific data for purposes which some of us would disapprove of.

Darwin never preached Social Darwinism. Darwin merely formulated a theory according to which certain species survived and certain species didn't, in accordance with certain natural laws. To apply that to human competition and say, 'Devil take the hindmost. The only people who are worth saving are the toughest, the cleverest, and the most ruthless, because they are the fittest', is a misapplication of what was a perfectly good biological theory which didn't dictate any particular specific form of behaviour. You might say, even if you were Darwin, there are certain forms of life which do not make for survival, but which nevertheless we value: Saintliness, Benevolence, Disinterestedness, all kinds of extreme purity of heart, may expose the people who have it to being crushed and eliminated by the strong, the wicked and the ruthless.

Nevertheless, we wish to support these people so long as it is possible to do so, we wish to organise society which will prevent the pike from eating the carp. In nature, pike do eat carp, but we will create artificial conditions in which the carp will survive because we are pro-carp. Anyhow because we think the rights of carp are as good as the rights of pike, and the strong mustn't eat up the weak. This is not incompatible with anything which we regard as being a law of biological survival.

The whole doctrine of Huxley, for example, who talked about nature being red in tooth and claw, is we must resist nature, not cooperate with her.¹⁰ He wanted to deny that nature was benevolent and meant well. He wanted to say nature was a cold, ruthless, cruel affair, so to speak, which is not interested in individuals, it has no moral content at all. This is what goes on in the world. But to be a human being is to have certain moral ideals in which case we must resist natural processes in the way in which lions and tigers can't. And therefore, what you would call ideology, I think, can be made independent of scientific findings, although scientific findings furnish the evidence of what you want to do. Goals are not provided by science.

ⁱ For Berlin's 'Two Concepts of Liberty', see: Isaiah Berlin (2013) *Liberty*, Henry Hardy (Ed.), Oxford: OUP, pp. 166-217.

ⁱⁱ This is a transcript of the audio from: ABC Radio National (13th June 2009) 'A Conversation with Isaiah Berlin', ABC Radio National, <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/philosopherszone/a-conversation-with-isaiah-berlin/3141828> (accessed 23rd September 2020).

¹⁰ Thomas H. Huxley (1893) *Evolution and Ethics*, London: Macmillan & Co.