

**Isaiah Berlin Lectures in the History of Ideas**  
**Lecture Four: Oxford, 9 February 2010**  
**“Freedom without Arbitrariness”**

1. Kant, *Groundwork*:

“Will is a kind of causality of living beings insofar as they are rational, and *freedom* would be that property of such causality that it can be efficient independent of alien causes *determining* it, just as *natural necessity* is the property of the causality of all nonrational beings to be determined to activity by alien influences.” (Ak. 4:446)

“The preceding definition of freedom is *negative* and therefore unfruitful for insight into its essence; but there flows from it a *positive* concept of freedom, which is so much the richer and more fruitful.” (Ak. 4:446)

“Natural necessity was a heteronomy of efficient causes, since every effect was possible only in accordance with the law that something else determines the efficient cause to causality: what, then, can freedom of the will be other than autonomy, that is, the will’s property of being a law to itself?” (Ak. 4:446-47)

2. Rousseau:

“the impulse of appetite alone is slavery, and obedience to a law that one has prescribed to oneself is freedom.”<sup>1</sup>

3. Kant, *Groundwork*:

“Since the concept of causality brings with it that of laws in accordance with which, by something we call a cause, something else, namely an effect, must be posited, so freedom, although it is not a property of the will in accordance with natural laws, is not for that reason lawless but must instead be causality in accordance with immutable laws but of a special kind; for otherwise a free will would be an absurdity [*ein Unding*].” (Ak. 4:446)

4. Any conception of freedom as autonomy, must explain how these two ingredients, *autos* and *nomos*, come together. What motivates the connection between freedom and law in the Idealist conception of freedom as autonomy is the idea that freedom must be opposed to *arbitrariness*, yet, at the same time come from the self.

5. A simple argument:

- (i) if actions are free in the way that libertarians suppose then they are undetermined,
- (ii) but, if they are undetermined, then they are arbitrary,
- (iii) hence they are random and unintelligible.

6. Another argument:

- (i) If determinism is true, all our actions are determined by the conjunction of a set of laws and the initial conditions under which those laws first applied.
- (ii) But those laws just happen to be the particular ones that they are.
- (iii) So the situation of the agent in a deterministic universe is the same as in the case of the objectionable form of libertarianism.

7. (i) If God is really God, then he is not subject to some higher power.  
(ii) So he must be free.

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<sup>1</sup> J.-J. Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), p. 56 [“... car l’impulsion du seul appétit est esclavage, et l’obéissance à la loi qu’on s’est prescrite est liberté.”]

- (iii) Yet if the character of what God creates is constrained only by his arbitrary fiat, then there is no possibility of insight into the goodness of God's creation by human reason.
8. If we impose a law upon ourselves then, surely, such a law then holds us within its power; how can such a law be said to be a fulfilment of freedom? If the self-given law that realises our freedom is *our* law, then it is ours not because we have chosen it by an act of arbitrary will: it is a law into which we have insight.
9. The idea of freedom as self-given law provides the common thread that connects the conceptions of freedom that run through German Idealism from Kant to Hegel.
10. (i) If responsibility requires freedom, and  
 (ii) if freedom consists in rational action, and  
 (iii) if rational action requires adherence to the moral law, then  
 (iv) actions which deviate from the moral law are not free and, hence,  
 (v) we are not responsible for them.
11. The distinction between the *Willkür* and the *Wille*:
- “Freedom of *Willkür* is this independence from being *determined* by sensuous impulses; this is the negative concept of freedom. The positive concept of freedom is that of the ability of pure reason to be itself practical. But this is not possible except by the subjection of the maxim of every action to the condition of its qualifying as universal law.”<sup>2</sup>
12. God's freedom (*Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*):
- “To reconcile the concept of freedom with the idea of God as a *necessary* being raises no difficulty at all: for freedom consists not in the contingency of the act (that it is determined by no grounds whatever) i.e. not in indeterminism (that God must be equally capable of doing good or evil if his actions are to be called free) but rather in absolute spontaneity. Such spontaneity is endangered only by predeterminism, where the determining ground of the act is *in antecedent time*, with the result that, the act being no longer in *my* power but in the hands of nature, I am irresistibly determined; but since in God no temporal sequence is thinkable, this difficulty vanishes.”<sup>3</sup>
13. We must distinguish between two kinds of necessity: “external”, constraining necessity and “internal” necessity in which the connection between what necessitates and what is necessitated is not extrinsic but intrinsic.
14. Fichte:
- “The initial correct presupposition, and the one which caused [Reinhold's] Principle of Consciousness to be proposed as the first principle of all philosophy, was precisely the presupposition that one must begin with a fact. We certainly do require a first principle which is material and not merely formal. But such a principle does not have to express a *fact*; it can also express an *act*.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Metaphysik der Sitten*, Ak. VI, 213-14 [“Die Freiheit der Willkür ist jene Unabhängigkeit ihrer Bestimmung durch sinnliche Antriebe; dies ist der negative Begriff derselben. Der positive ist: das Vermögen der reinen Vernunft für sich selbst praktisch zu sein. Dieses ist aber nicht anders möglich, als durch die Unterwerfung der Maxime einer jeden Handlung unter die Bedingung der Tauglichkeit der erstern zum allgemeinen Gesetze.”]

<sup>3</sup> *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, translated by T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 45n. [“Den Begriff der Freiheit mit der Idee von Gott, als einem notwendigen Wesen, zu vereinigen, hat gar keine Schwierigkeit: weil die Freiheit nicht in der Zufälligkeit der Handlung (dass sie gar nicht durch Gründe determiniert sei), d.i. nicht im Indeterminismus (dass Gutes oder Böses zu thun Gott gleich möglich sein müsse, wenn man seine Handlung frei nennen sollte), sondern in der absoluten Spontaneität besteht, welche allein beim Prädeterminismus Gefahr läuft, wo der Bestimmungsgrund der Handlung in der vorigen Zeit ist, mithin so dass jetzt die Handlung nicht mehr in meiner Gewalt, sondern in der Hand der Natur ist, mich unwiderstehlich bestimmt; da dann, weil in Gott keine Zeitfolge zu denken ist, diese Schwierigkeit wegfällt.] Ak. VI, 50n

<sup>4</sup> Fichte, “Review of *Aenesidemus*”, in *Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. D. Breazeale, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 1988), pp. 59-77, p.64

“Freedom (or what is the same thing) the immediate action of the I is, as such, the point where ideality and reality are united. The I is free inasmuch as and because it posits itself as free or sets itself free inasmuch as it is free. Specific determinations and being are [here] one and the same. The I acts in the very decision to act, and by acting it determines itself.”<sup>5</sup>

15. Spinoza:

“I say that that thing is free which exists and acts solely from the necessity of its own nature; but that that thing is under compulsion which is determined by something else to exist, and to act in a definite and determined manner. For example, God, although He exists necessarily, nevertheless exists freely, since He exists solely from the necessity of His own nature. So also God freely understands Himself and absolutely all things, since it follows solely from the necessity of His own nature that He should understand everything. You see, therefore, that I do not place Freedom in free decision, but in free necessity.”<sup>6</sup>

16. Schelling:

“This is the point at which necessity and freedom must be united if they can be united at all. If this essence were a dead being and, with regard to man, a mere datum, then, since action would only follow from it with necessity, responsibility and all freedom would be removed. But just this inner necessity is itself freedom; man’s being is essentially his own deed. Necessity and freedom interpenetrate as *one* being which only appears as one or the other when seen from different perspectives – in itself it is freedom but, formally regarded, it is necessity.”<sup>7</sup>

17. Hegel, like Kant, understands freedom as requiring a necessity that is unlike the necessity that is at work in the causal processes of nature.

“... nature is not free, but is only necessary and contingent. For necessity is the inseparability of different terms which yet appear as indifferent towards each other; but because this abstract state of externality also receives its due, there is contingency in nature – external necessity, not the internal necessity of the notion.”<sup>8</sup>

18. Hegel, like Kant, denies that *Willkür* can be true freedom and for the same reason: that *Willkür* is arbitrary:

“*Willkür* implies that the content is made mine not by the nature of my will but by chance. Thus I am dependent on this content and this is the contradiction lying in *Willkür*. The common man thinks that he is free if it is open to him to act arbitrarily but his very *Willkür* implies that he is not free.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> „Outline of the Distinctive Character of the *Wissenschaftslehre*”, in *Early Philosophical Writings*, pp. 243-306, p.276

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Schuller, October 1674, in *The Correspondence of Spinoza*, edited by A. Wolf (London: Frank Cass, 1966) pp. 274-75

<sup>7</sup> [Hier liegt der Punkt, bei welchem Notwendigkeit und Freiheit vereinigt werden müssen, wenn sie überhaupt vereinbar sind. Wäre jenes Wesen ein totes Sein und in Ansehung des Menschen ein ihm bloss gegebenes, so wäre, da die Handlung aus ihm nur mit Notwendigkeit folgen kann, die Zurechnungsfähigkeit und alle Freiheit aufgehoben. Aber eben jene inner Notwendigkeit ist selber die Freiheit, das Wesen des Menschen ist wesentlich *seine eigene Tat*; Notwendigkeit und Freiheit stehen ineinander, als *ein* Wesen, das nur von Verschiedenen Seiten betrachtet als das eine oder andere erscheint, an sich Freiheit, formell Notwendigkeit.] Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften II, Werke, IX*, para. 248, p. 30. [‘... so ist die Natur nicht frei, sondern nur notwendig und zufällig. Denn Notwendigkeit ist Untrennbarkeit von Unterschiedenen, die noch gleichgültig erscheinen; daß aber die Abstraktion des Außersichseins auch zu ihrem Rechte kommt, ist die Zufälligkeit, die äußerliche Notwendigkeit, nicht die innere Notwendigkeit des Begriffs.’]

<sup>9</sup> *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts, Werke, VII*, para. 15, *Zusatz*, p. 67. [“In der Willkür ist das enthalten, dass der Inhalt nicht durch die Natur meines Willens bestimmt ist, der meinige zu sein, sondern durch *Zufälligkeit*; ich bin ebenso abhängig von diesem Inhalt, und dies ist der Widerspruch, der in der Willkür liegt. Der gewöhnliche Mensch glaubt, frei zu sein, wenn ihm willkürlich zu handeln erlaubt ist, aber gerade in der Willkür liegt, dass er nicht frei ist.”]

19. The free self must determine itself in such a way that it remains “*bei sich*” in its determinacy. Hegel gives an example of the will as it operates at the level of feeling – in friendship, or in love:

“Here we are not inherently one-sided; we restrict ourselves gladly in relating ourselves to another, but in this restriction know ourselves as ourselves. In this determinacy a man should not feel himself determined; on the contrary, since he treats the other as an other, it is there that he first arrives at the feeling of self-hood. ... Freedom is to will something determinate, yet in this determinacy to be by oneself and to revert once more to the universal.”<sup>10</sup>

20. While Hegel wishes to reassert the need for action and embodiment as part of freedom, the standpoint from which this assertion is made is the standpoint of reason.:

“When I will what is rational, I am acting not as a particular individual but in accordance with the concepts of *Sittlichkeit* in general: in an ethical action I do not assert myself but the matter in hand. Men allow their particularity to come to the fore most when they perform wrong actions. What is rational is the high road on which everyone travels and no one is conspicuous.”<sup>11</sup>

21. If we have *autos* without *nomos*, the result is mere arbitrariness – a freedom that is capricious and incapable of being the subject of rational insight. But what about the *autos*? Which determinations *are* internal to my essence? Is everything into which we have rational insight just for that reason to be seen as part of “me” – as forming part of my “practical identity”? Is rational insight sufficient for me to remain “at home in otherness”?

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<sup>10</sup> *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts, Werke, VII, para. 7, Zusatz, p. 57.* [“Hier ist man nicht einseitig in sich, sondern man beschränkt sich gern in Beziehung auf ein Anderes, weiss sich aber in dieser Beschränkung als sich selbst. In der Bestimmtheit soll sich der Mensch nicht bestimmt fühlen, sondern indem man das Andere als Anderes betrachtet, hat man darin erst Selbstgefühl. ... die Freiheit ist ein bestimmtes zu wollen, aber in dieser Bestimmtheit bei sich zu sein und wieder in das Allgemeine zurückzukehren.”]

<sup>11</sup> *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts, Werke, VII, para. 15, Zusatz, p. 67.* [“Wenn ich das Vernünftige will, so handle ich nicht als partikulares Individuum, sondern nach den Begriffen der Sittlichkeit überhaupt: in einer sittlichen Handlung mache ich nicht mich selbst, sondern die Sache geltend. Der Mensch aber, indem er etwas Verkehrtes tut, lässt seine Partikularität am meisten hervortreten. Das Vernünftige ist die Landstrasse, wo jeder geht, wo niemand sich auszeichnet.”]