

**Isaiah Berlin Lectures in the History of Ideas**  
**Lecture Six: Oxford, 23 February 2010**  
*“Morality and Freedom”*

1. Justice: belief in after-life but also the “foundation of a kingdom of God on earth”, a “universal republic based on the laws of virtue”. (Ak. 6:98)

2. *Metaphysics of Morals*:

“For in view of the eventual multitude of criminals who keep the register of their guilt running on and on, punitive justice would make the *end* of creation consist not in the creator’s *love* (as one must yet think it to be) but rather in the strict observance of His *right* (it would make God’s right itself, located in His *glory*, the end). But since the latter (justice) is only the condition limiting the former (benevolence), this seems to contradict principles of practical reason, by which the creation of a world must have been omitted if it would have produced a result so contrary to the intention of its author, which can only have love for its basis.

From all this it is clear that in ethics, as pure practical philosophy of internal lawgiving, only the moral relations of *men to men* are conceivable by us. The question of what sort of moral relation holds between God and man goes completely beyond the bounds of ethics and is altogether inconceivable for us. This, then, confirms what was maintained above: that ethics cannot extend beyond the limits of men’s duties to one another.” (Ak. 6: 490-91)

3. Condorcet:

“The contemplation of this picture is an asylum in which the memory of [the virtuous man’s] persecutors does not follow him, an asylum in which, living in imagination with mankind re-established in its rights and in its true nature, he can forget mankind corrupted and tormented by greed, fear, envy. It is in this asylum that he truly lives with his fellows, in a heaven which his reason has created, and which his love of humanity embellishes with the purest joys”.<sup>1</sup>

4. Trotsky:

“If our generation happens to be too weak to establish socialism over the earth, we will hand the spotless banner down to our children. The struggle which is in the offing transcends by far the importance of individuals, factions, and parties. It is the struggle for the future of all mankind. It will be severe. It will be lengthy. Whoever seeks physical comfort and spiritual calm, let him step aside. In time of reaction it is more convenient to lean on the bureaucracy than on the truth. But all those for whom the word *socialism* is not a hollow sound but the content of their moral life – forward! Neither threats, nor persecutions, nor violations can stop us! Be it even over our bleaching bones, the truth will triumph! We will blaze the trail for it. It will conquer! Under all the severe blows of fate, I shall be happy, as in the best days of my youth! Because, my friends, the highest human happiness is not the exploitation of the present but the preparation of the future.”<sup>2</sup>

5. “History will absolve me!” Fidel Castro, 1953.

6. *Oldest System-Programme*:

“Finally come the ideas of a moral world, divinity, immortality – the overthrow of all superstition and the persecution through reason itself of the priesthood that currently pretends to reason. Then follows the absolute freedom of all spirits, which carry the intellectual world in themselves, and which may not seek God or immortality *outside themselves*.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, p.151

<sup>2</sup> Leon Trotsky, “I Stake My Life!” (1937)

<sup>3</sup> “Das ‘älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus’”, in *Mythologie der Vernunft*, ed. by C. Jamme and H. Schneider (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M., 1984), pp. 11-14, p.11

7. Rawls:

“it suffices for heteronomy that first principles obtain in virtue of relations among objects the nature of which is not affected or determined by our conception of ourselves as reasonable and rational persons (as possessing the powers of practical reason), and of the public role of moral principles in a society of such persons.”<sup>4</sup>

“In contrast with rational intuitionism, constitutive autonomy says that the so-called independent order of values does not constitute itself but is constituted by the activity, actual or ideal, of practical (human) reason itself. I believe this, or something like it, is Kant’s view.”<sup>5</sup>

8. Kant:

Only “morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of humanity” has “dignity” – that is “inner, incomparable worth”<sup>6</sup>.

“We must not be virtuous for the sake of advantage; if so, all morality is totally lost. From morality we reap no benefit; on the contrary, it costs us. ... Its inner worth must be its motivating ground ... Both in this life and in the next happiness is at odds with morality.”<sup>7</sup>

9. Korsgaard:

“Kant begins by defining a free will as a causality that is effective without being determined by any alien cause. Anything outside of the will counts as an alien cause, including the desires and inclinations of the person. The free will must be entirely self-determining. Yet, because the will is a cause, it must act according to some law or other: a lawless cause, Kant thinks, is a kind of contradiction. Alternatively, we may say that since the will is practical reason, it cannot be conceived as acting and choosing for no reason. Since reasons are derived from principles, the free will must have a principle. But because the will is free, no law or principle can be imposed on it from outside. Kant concludes that the will must be autonomous: that is, it must have its *own* law or principle. But now we have a problem: for where is this principle to come from? If it is imposed on the will from outside then the will is not free. So the will must adopt a principle for itself. But until the will has a principle, there is nothing from which it can derive a reason. So how can it have any reason for adopting one principle rather than another? And indeed the problem is in a way even worse than that. For it looks as if the free will, by imposing some principle upon itself, must restrict its own freedom in some arbitrary way.”<sup>8</sup>

- (1) Freedom requires causality
- (2) Causality requires law
- (3) Freedom is incompatible with being “determined by an alien cause”
- (4) “Anything outside of the will counts as an alien cause, including the desires and inclinations of the person.” Therefore:
- (5) Freedom requires that the will is the source of its own law

10. *On the Basis of Morality*:

“Every *ought* derives all sense and meaning simply and solely in reference to threatened punishment or promised reward”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Themes in Kant’s Moral Philosophy”, p.97

<sup>5</sup> *Political Liberalism*, p.99

<sup>6</sup> *Groundwork*, (Ak. 4: 435-36)

<sup>7</sup> *Lectures on Ethics* (Mrongovius), Ak. 29: 623-24

<sup>8</sup> Korsgaard, C. M. 2003, “Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth Century Moral Philosophy”, *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 99–122, p. 114

<sup>9</sup> *On the Basis of Morality* (1841) (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), p.55

“The complete, utter impossibility and absurdity of this concept of an *unconditional obligation* that underlies Kant’s ethics appear later in his system itself, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, like a hidden poison that cannot remain in the organism, but must finally break out and show itself. Thus that *ought*, said to be so *unconditioned*, nevertheless in the background postulates the immortality of the person to be rewarded, and a rewarder. This, of course, is necessary when once we have made duty and obligation the fundamental concepts of ethics.”<sup>10</sup>

“A commanding voice, whether coming from within or without, cannot possibly be imagined except as threatening or punishing.”<sup>11</sup>

11. *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone:*

“I readily grant that I am unable to associate *grace* with the *concept of duty* by reason of the latter’s very dignity. For the concept of duty includes unconditional necessitation, to which gracefulness stands in direct contradiction. The majesty of the law (like the law on Sinai) instills awe (not dread, which repels; and also not fascination, which invites familiarity); and this awe rouses the respect of the subject toward his master, except that, in this case, since the master lies in us, it rouses a *feeling of the sublimity* of our own vocation [*Bestimmung*] that enraptures us more than any beauty.”(Ak. 6:23)

*Lectures on Ethics* (Vigilantius):

“... from this it is also certain that every obligation is ... associated with a moral constraint, and that it is contrary to the nature of duty to *enjoy* having duties incumbent upon one; it is necessary, rather, that man’s impulses should make him disinclined to fulfil the moral laws, and that these impulses should be overcome only through the authority of the laws, without it being possible to say that these laws demand respect in the manner of painful or despotic commands. Given that man’s fulfilment of the moral laws can be accomplished only under a necessitation, it cannot therefore be claimed, as Schiller does ... that such fulfilment also has a certain grace about it.” (Ak. 27:490)

*Critique of Practical Reason:*

“[The origin of duty] can be nothing less than what elevates a human being above himself (as part of the sensible world), what connects him with an order of things that only the understanding can think and that at the same time has under it the whole sensible world ...” (Ak. 5:86)

12. *The Spirit of Christianity:*

“We might have expected Jesus ... to show that ... even if every ought, every command, declares itself as something alien, nevertheless as concept (universality) it is something subjective, and, as subjective, as a product of human power ... it loses its objectivity, its positivity, its heteronomy, and the thing commanded is revealed as grounded in an autonomy of the human will.”<sup>12</sup>

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“By this line of argument, however, positivity is only partially removed; and between the Shaman of the Tungus, the European prelate who rules over Church and State, the Voguls and the Puritans, on the one hand, and the man who listens to his own command of duty on the other, the difference is not that the former make themselves slaves while the latter is free, but that the former have their lord outside themselves while the latter carries his lord in himself, yet is at the same time his own slave.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *On the Basis of Morality*, p.55

<sup>11</sup> *On the Basis of Morality*, p.55

<sup>12</sup> *The Spirit of Christianity*, in *Early Theological Writings* (Philadelphia, PA: U. of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp. 182-301, pp.210-11

<sup>13</sup> *The Spirit of Christianity*, p.211

“Retribution [*Wiedervergeltung*] and its equivalence with crimes is the sacred principle of all justice, the principle on which any political order [*Staatsverfassung*] must rest. But Jesus makes the universal demand for the surrender of rights [*Aufhebung des Rechts*], elevation above the entire sphere of justice and injustice through love. Through love there disappears, along with rights [*das Recht*], also the feeling of inequality and the normative requirement [*das Soll*] of this feeling, the demand for equality – that is, the hatred of one’s enemies.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *The Spirit of Christianity*, p.218