

**Isaiah Berlin Lectures in the History of Ideas**  
**Lecture Two: Oxford, 26 January 2010**  
**“The Idealist theory of history defended (sort of)”**

1. The Euthyphro dilemma and the problem of theodicy.
2. How are synthetic a priori truths possible?:
  - (1) There evidently *are* synthetic a priori truths: the truths of mathematics, in particular, Euclidean geometry.
  - (2) These truths are true independent of our experience of the world and yet they apply necessarily to reality.
  - (3) If only we knew how that could be so, we would know how philosophical truths (will be possible too.
3. Marxism: Historical materialism has a “diachronic” theory of historical change and a “synchronic” theory of how societies cohere.
4. Skinner: Ideas play a role in providing “legitimation” for “form[s] of social behaviour generally agreed to be questionable”.<sup>1</sup> “[It is] in large part by the rhetorical manipulation of [evaluative-descriptive] terms that any society succeeds in establishing, upholding, questioning or altering its moral identity.”<sup>2</sup>
5. Hegel: Societies change because, in the end, they are all vehicles of Spirit (*Geist*) as it comes to realize and know itself:

[All] development [*Bildung*] reduces itself to a difference in categories. All revolutions, in the sciences, no less than in world history, derive from the fact that *Geist*, for its own understanding and self-awareness, in order to possess itself, has now changed its categories, and grasped itself more deeply, inwardly and unitarily.<sup>3</sup>
6. Societies are held together because they embody *Geist*’s progress towards self-knowledge:

...each stage [of the development of the *Weltgeist*], being different from every other one, has its specific and particular principle. In history, such a principle becomes the particular determination of the spirit [*ein besonderer Volksgeist*]. It is here that it expresses concretely all the aspects of its consciousness and will, its total reality; it is this that imparts a common stamp [*das gemeinschaftliche Gepräge*] to its religion, its political constitution, its social ethics [*Sittlichkeit*], its legal system, its *mores* [*Sitten*], but also to its science, its art, its technical skill. These special peculiarities must be understood as deriving from that general peculiarity, the particular principle of a people.<sup>4</sup>
7. The history of philosophy is “the fullest blossom, the notion [*Begriff*] of *Geist* in its entire form, the consciousness and spiritual essence of all things, the *Geist* of the age as *Geist* present in itself.”<sup>5</sup>
8. Nietzsche: “Apollonianism”, “Dionysianism”, “Socratism”.

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<sup>1</sup> *Visions of Politics*, Vol. I, p.148

<sup>2</sup> *Visions of Politics*, Vol. I, p.149

<sup>3</sup> *Enzyklopädie II*, para. 246

<sup>4</sup> *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, pp. 86-87

<sup>5</sup> *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, I, p.73

Man, the bravest of animals and the one most accustomed to suffering, does *not* repudiate suffering as such; he *desires* it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a *meaning* for it, a purpose of suffering. The meaninglessness of suffering, not suffering itself, was the curse that lay over mankind so far.<sup>6</sup>

9. Apollonianism and Dionysianism: *dreams* and *intoxication*.

10. Apollonian deities:

The same impulse which calls art into being as the contemplation and consummation of existence, seducing one to a continuation of life, was also the cause of the Olympian world which the Hellenic “will” made use of as a transfiguring mirror. Thus do the gods justify the life of man: they themselves live it – the only satisfactory theodicy!<sup>7</sup>

11. Socratism:

... the unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it. This sublime metaphysical illusion accompanies science as an instinct and leads science again and again to its limits at which it must turn into *art* – *which is really the aim of this mechanism*.<sup>8</sup>

12. Hegel:

The public are concerned in philosophy with religion – lost religion; not science – that only comes afterwards. Human beings want to want to experience what their situation is, they want satisfaction for themselves; that is the interest of humanity in this age.<sup>9</sup>

13. *The Gay Science*:

After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave – a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. – And we – we still have to vanquish his shadow.<sup>10</sup>

14. Original Sin leads us to doubt God’s benevolence; optimism his omnipotence.

15. *Euthyphro*: “Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?” (10a)

16. *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism*:

It is important to recognize that Kant’s new concept of autonomy was formulated primarily in a political rather than a metaphysical context. What disturbed Kant was not the problem of determinism but that of oppression. Tyranny and injustice are threats to freedom, not the causality of the natural order. As if to thrust the metaphysical issue aside, Kant bluntly states that the subjugation of one person by another is the greatest evil, far more unbearable than “the yoke of necessity”. We can resign ourselves to the misfortunes of fate, but we cannot suffer direction by another’s will. “There can be nothing more unbearable than for the action of one person to stand under the will of another. Consequently, there can be no more natural aversion than against servitude.” Kant’s remarks in the *Beobachtungen* are obsessed with the baneful effects of

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<sup>6</sup> *Genealogy of Morals*, Sect. 28

<sup>7</sup> *Birth of Tragedy*, Sect. 3

<sup>8</sup> *Birth of Tragedy*, Sect. 15

<sup>9</sup> *Jenaer Schriften*, Werke 2, p. 557

<sup>10</sup> *The Gay Science*, Sect. 108

inequality, corruption, and injustice. The only solution to these evils, Kant was convinced, is the education of Rousseau and the creation of a free and just society.

The novelty of Kant's new ethics becomes clear in its broader historical context. Although Kant was not fully aware of it, his Rousseauian ideas mark a profound break with the prevalent natural law tradition of Pufendorf and the Wolffian school. This tradition places the source of moral value not in the human will but in the providential order. The law of nature is the end appropriate to a thing, the purpose God intended for it. To know our moral obligations, then, we need to know "the vocation of man", our place in the Creation or role in the divine design. Although Pufendorf and Wolff maintained that natural law can be justified by natural reason alone, they never ceased to regard God as its creator and enforcer. Compared to this tradition, Kant's new ethics are revolutionary. The source of moral value is the rational will inside us, not the providential order outside us. Here lies the real depth and impact of Kant's Copernican revolution. This took place not only in epistemology but also in ethics. Just as the natural world depends on the laws of the understanding, so the moral world depends on the laws of the will. Both ethics and epistemology have become anthropocentric.

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The political implications of Kant's new ethics are ... radical in the extreme. If the human will creates moral values, so that it is obliged to obey only the laws of its own making, then it has the right to recreate the entire social and political world. The onus is now on society and the state, not on the individual. Rather than individuals conforming to a divinely sanctioned social and political order, it must conform to the demands of their will.<sup>11</sup>

16. Beiser:

- (1) Kant's conception of autonomy was "political not metaphysical" – that he was disturbed by "tyranny and injustice" but not by determinism and "the causality of the natural order".
- (2) His ideas marked a "profound break" with the prevalent natural law tradition, a tradition that "places the source of moral value not in the human will but in the providential order".
- (2a) Kant, however, was "not fully aware" of this profound break.
- (3) "The human will creates moral values". In the wake of Kant, ethics (like epistemology) "had become anthropocentric".

17. Hegel:

Our examination [of history] is a theodicy, a justification of God, such as Leibniz in his way attempted metaphysically in abstract, indeterminate categories, so that the evil in the world could be comprehended and the thinking Spirit [*Geist*] reconciled with evil.<sup>12</sup>

18. *Émile* (1762):

It is the abuse of our powers that makes us unhappy and wicked. Our cares, our sorrows, our sufferings are of our own making. Moral ills are undoubtedly the work of man, and physical ills would be nothing but for our vices which have made us liable to them. Has not nature made us feel our needs as a means to our preservation? Is not bodily suffering a sign that the machine is out of order and needs attention? Death. . . . Do not the wicked poison their own life and ours? Who would wish to live for ever? Death is the cure for the evils you bring upon yourself; nature would not have you suffer perpetually. How few sufferings are felt by man living in a state of primitive simplicity! His life is almost entirely free from suffering and from passion; he neither fears nor feels death; if he feels it, his sufferings make him desire it; henceforth it is no evil in his eyes. If we were but content to be ourselves we should have no cause to complain of our lot; but in the search for an imaginary good we find a thousand real ills. He who cannot bear a little pain must

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<sup>11</sup> *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1992), pp. 30-31

<sup>12</sup> *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, p. 28

expect to suffer greatly. If a man injures his constitution by dissipation, you try to cure him with medicine; the ill he fears is added to the ill he feels; the thought of death makes it horrible and hastens its approach; the more we seek to escape from it, the more we are aware of it; and we go through life in the fear of death, blaming nature for the evils we have inflicted on ourselves by our neglect of her laws.

O Man! seek no further for the author of evil; thou art he. There is no evil but the evil you do or the evil you suffer, and both come from yourself. Evil in general can only spring from disorder, and in the order of the world I find a never-failing system. Evil in particular cases exists only in the mind of those who experience it; and this feeling is not the gift of nature, but the work of man himself. Pain has little power over those who, having thought little, look neither before nor after. Take away our fatal progress, take away our faults and our vices, take away man's handiwork, and all is well.<sup>13</sup>

19. Kant:
- (i) the “morally counterpurposive”
  - (ii) the “physically counterpurposive”
  - (iii) the counterpurposiveness of *justice*, arising from “the bad state which the disproportion between the impunity of the depraved and their crimes seems to indicate in the world”.(Ak. 8:257)
20. It is remarkable that of all the difficulties in reconciling the course of world events with the divinity of their creator, none imposes itself on the mind as starkly as that of the semblance in them of a lack of *justice*. If it comes about (although it seldom happens) that an unjust, especially violent, villain does not escape unpunished from the world, then the impartial spectator rejoices, now reconciled with heaven. No purposiveness of nature will so excite him in admiration of it and, as it were, make him detect God's hand in it. Why? Because nature is here moral, solely of the kind we seldom can hope to perceive in the world.<sup>14</sup>
21. “Happiness is the state of a rational being in the world in the whole of whose existence *everything goes according to his wish and will*.” (Ak. 5:124).
22. Rawls: “The distinctive thesis [of rational intuitionism] for our purposes [is that] first principles ... are regarded as true or false in virtue of a moral order of values that is prior to and independent of our conceptions of person and society, and of the public social role of moral doctrines”.<sup>15</sup>
23. ... basic moral concepts are conceptually independent of natural concepts, and first principles as grasped by rational intuition are viewed as synthetic a priori, and so independent of any particular order of nature. They give the contents of an ethics of creation, so to speak: the principles God would use to ascertain which is the best of all possible worlds. Thus it may seem that for Kant such principles are not heteronomous.<sup>16</sup>
24. Yet in Kant's moral constructivism 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 ... Heteronomy obtains not only when these first principles are fixed by the special psychological constitution of human nature, as in Hume, but also when they are fixed by an order of universals, or of moral values grasped by rational intuition, as in Plato's realm of forms or in Leibniz's hierarchy of perfections. Thus an essential feature of Kant's moral constructivism is that the first principles of right and justice are

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<sup>13</sup> *Émile*, Book IV

<sup>14</sup> Ak. 8:260

<sup>15</sup> “Themes in Kant's Moral Philosophy”, in E. Förster (ed.), *Kant's Transcendental Deductions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford U.P., 1989), pp. 81-113, p. 95

<sup>16</sup> “Themes in Kant's Moral Philosophy”, pp. 96-97

seen as specified by a procedure of construction ... the form and structure of which mirrors our free moral personality as both reasonable and rational.<sup>17</sup>

25. *Lectures on Ethics:*

Can we, even without presupposing God's existence and His *arbitrium*, derive all obligations from within? *Responsio*: not merely in the affirmative, for this, rather, is *ex natura rei*, and we conclude from this to God's choice.

From the *arbitrium divinum* I cannot myself obtain the relevant concepts of the good, unless the concept of the morally good be assumed beforehand; apart from that, the sheer *arbitrium* of God is god merely in a physical sense. In short, the judgement as to the perfection of God's *arbitrium* presupposes the investigation of moral perfection.

Supposing the *arbitrium* of God to be known to me, where is the necessity that I should do it, if I have not already derived the obligation from the nature of the case: God wills it – why should I? He will punish me; in that case it is injurious, but not in itself wicked; that is how we obey a despot; in that case the act is no sin, in the strict sense, but politically imprudent; and why does God will it? Why does He punish it? Because I am obligated to do it, not because He has the power to punish. The very application of the *arbitrium divinum* to the *factum*, as a ground, presupposes the concept of obligation; and since this constitutes natural religion, the latter is a part, but not the basic principle, of morality. It is probable that, since God by His *arbitrium*, is the ground of all things, this is also the case here; He is indeed the ground of it, but not *per arbitrium*, for since He is the ground of possibility, He is also the material ground (since in Him all things are given) of geometrical truths and morality. In him there is already morality, therefore, and so His choice is not the ground.

The quarrel between reformers and Lutherans over *arbitrium divinum* and *decretus absolutus* is based on the fact that even in God morality must exist; and every conception of the divine *arbitrium* itself vanishes, if morality is not presupposed; this cannot, however, be demonstrated from the world (where it is merely possible), since the good things of the world may merely be physical consequences. How dreadful, though, is a God without morality. (Ak. 27:9-10)

26. *The Critique of Pure Reason:*

It was the moral ideas that gave rise to that concept of a Divine Being which we now hold to be correct ... it is these very laws that have led us, in virtue of their *inner* practical necessity, to the postulate of a self-sufficient cause, or of a wise Ruler of the world, in order that through such agency effect may be given to them. We may not, therefore, in reversal of such a procedure, regard them as accidental and derived from the mere will of the Ruler, especially as we have no conception of such a will, except as formed in accordance with these laws. So far, then, as practical reason has the right to serve as our guide, we shall not look upon actions as obligatory because they are the commands of God, but shall regard them as divine commands because we have an inward obligation to them. (A818-19, B846-47)

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<sup>17</sup> "Themes in Kant's Moral Philosophy", p.97