

Isaiah Berlin Lectures in the History of Ideas
Lecture Five: Oxford, 16 February 2010
“Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht”

1. “The history of the world is the Last Judgement.” The aether of modernity.
2. Two received images of Kant’s enterprise: Heinrich Heine. Kant as the German Robespierre. “Lampe must have his God.” Limiting reason to “make room” for faith.
3. *Critique of Pure Reason*:

“On a cursory view of the present work it may seem that its results are merely *negative*, warning us that we must never venture with speculative reason beyond the limits of experience. Such is in fact its primary use. But such teaching at once acquires a *positive* value when we recognize that the principles with which speculative reason ventures out beyond its proper limits do not in effect *extend* the employment of reason, but, as we find on closer scrutiny, inevitably *narrow* it. These principles properly belong to sensibility, and when thus employed they threaten to make the bounds of sensibility coextensive with the real, and so to supplant reason in its pure (practical) employment.”¹

Separating faith from knowledge may look like a liberation rather than a limitation for religious faith.
4. *Metaphysics of Morals*:

“A law that binds us a priori and unconditionally by our own reason can also be expressed as proceeding from the will of a supreme lawgiver, that is, one who has only rights and no duties (hence from the divine will); but this signifies only the Idea of a moral being whose will is a law for everyone, without his being thought as the author [*Urheber*] of the law.” (Ak. 6:227)
5. God is not *bound, limited* or *subject to* but morality is *essential* to Him and reliably knowable by us.

In tying God to morality, Kant is calling into question God’s transcendence in a way that is more radical than denying the knowability of God or making morality a matter of human construction.
6. Friedrich Schelling:

“If the task of transcendental philosophy is to order the real under the ideal, then, conversely, the task of the philosophy of nature is to explain the ideal by means of the real.”²
7. A.W. Schlegel

“The beautiful is a symbolic presentation [*Darstellung*] of the infinite” (*Berlin Lectures*)
8. Dionysianism (the escape from suffering by ecstatic self-transformation), Apollonianism (the contemplation of a realm of beauty, free from suffering) and Socraticism (the drive to make suffering intelligible)
9. The “counterpurposiveness of justice” (Ak. 8:257). Justice is the “disproportion between the impunity of the depraved and their crimes” (Ak. 8:257)
10. “Theory and Practice”:

¹ *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxiv

² “Introduction to the Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature” (1799) in O’Connor and Mohr, eds., *German Idealism: a Reader*, p.368

... that the human being *ought to perform* his duty quite unselfishly and that he must altogether separate his craving for happiness from the concept of duty, in order to have this concept quite pure: of that he is aware with the utmost clarity, or, should he believe that he is not, it can be required of him that he be so, as far as he can; for the true worth of morality is to be found in this purity, and he must therefore also be capable of it. (Ak. 8:284)

11. *Critique of Practical Reason,*

“[Moral theory [*die Moral*]] is not properly the doctrine of how we are to make ourselves happy but of how we are to become *worthy* of happiness.” (Ak. 5:130)

The “highest good” requires that happiness be combined “in the most exact proportion” with the worthiness that comes from moral conduct. (Ak. 5: 129-30)

Only when religion is added to morality “does there also enter the hope of some day participating in happiness to the extent that we have been intent upon not being unworthy of it”. (Ak. 5:130)

I am to *hope for* happiness from actions that are, not – indeed, if they are to make me worthy of happiness, that *cannot* be – *aimed at* happiness.

12. The existence of injustice is a difficulty that stands in the way of rational belief in God and yet the need to establish an appropriate proportionality between happiness and desert is represented as a reason *for* religious belief.

13. (1) There exists a (benevolent, omnipotent, omniscient) God.

But:

(2) The world shows features that are incompatible with benevolence/omnipotence/omniscience.

Hence:

(3) We must infer the existence of another world beyond this one within which such conflicts will be reconciled.

14. “... one can indeed cut the knot through an appeal to the supreme wisdom that so willed, but one cannot *untie* the knot, which is what theodicy claims to be capable of accomplishing.” (Ak. 8:260)

15. For modern philosophers who believe in “desert” it isn’t that it is *good* that bad things should happen to bad people but that, if bad things have to happen at all, then it is better (or, at least, less bad) that they should happen to bad people rather than to good ones.

16. The asymmetry between the absence of happiness for the good and the happiness of the wicked:

“... the lament over the lack of justice shown in the wrongs which are the lot of human beings here on earth is directed not at the well-being that does not befall the good, but at the ill that does not befall the evil (although if well-being occurs to the evil then the contrast makes the offence all the greater). For under divine rule even the best of human beings cannot found his wish to fare well on God’s beneficence, for one who only does what he owes can have no rightful claim on God’s benevolence.” (Ak. 8:258)

It would be good for God to reward the good, but it is *wrong* that the bad go unpunished.

17. Punishment is something good in itself:

“... punishment in the exercise of justice is founded in the legislating wisdom in no way as mere means but as an end: trespass is associated with ills not that some other good may result from it, but because this connection is good in itself, i.e. morally and necessarily good.” (Ak. 8:257)

18. *Metaphysics of Morals*:
 “it is from the necessity of punishment that the inference to a future life is drawn” (Ak. 6:490)
19. The concern for justice that leads us to believe in a future life does not have to be “first personal” but embodies a kind of third-personal vision.
20. Justice points us towards God and a world beyond, but justice does not wholly transcend human capacities.
21. *Lectures on Ethics* (Collins Transcript of 1784-85):
 “The final destiny of the human race is moral perfection, so far as it is accomplished through freedom, whereby man, in that case, is capable of the greatest human happiness. God might already have made men perfect in this fashion, and allotted to each his share of happiness, but in that case it would not have sprung from the inner *principium* of the world. But that inner principle is freedom. The destiny of man is therefore to gain his greatest perfection by means of his freedom. God does not simply will that we should be happy, but rather that we should make ourselves happy, and that is the true morality. The universal end of mankind is the highest moral perfection; if only everyone were so to behave that their conduct would coincide with the universal end, the highest perfection would be thereby attained. Every individual must endeavour to order his conduct in accordance with this end, whereby he makes his contribution such that, if everyone does likewise, perfection is attained.” (Ak. 27:470)
22. Kant’s conception of the highest good brings religion and politics together in the idea of an ethical community:
 “... this highest moral good will not be brought about solely through the striving of one individual person for his own moral perfection but requires rather a union of such persons into a whole ... toward a system of well-disposed human beings ... a universal republic based on the laws of virtue” (*Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Ak. 6:97-98)
 Though the attainment of such a republic of virtue is, in principle, within human powers, the duty of working towards it “will need the presupposition of another idea, namely, of a higher moral being through whose universal organization the forces of single individuals, insufficient on their own, are united for a common effect.” (Ak. 6:98)
23. “*Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*”. Section 340, *Philosophy of Right*.
24. *Resignation: a Fantasy*, Friedrich Schiller (1786)
 The world contains within it two flowers: *pleasure (Genuss)* and *hope (Hoffnung)*. Those who choose one must renounce the other. Hope is not just pleasure postponed – if you choose hope, you must abstain.
25. Herder:
 “all preceding generations [were made] properly for the last alone, which is to be enthroned on the ruined scaffolding of the happiness of the rest.”³
26. Herzen:
 “Do you truly wish to condemn the human beings alive today to the sad role of caryatids supporting a floor for others some day to dance on?”⁴
27. Kant:

³ *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, Bk VIII, Ch. 5

⁴ Quoted in I. Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (London: Penguin, 1994, p.105)

The realization of justice requires a community: a “union of ... persons, a system of well-disposed human beings in which, and through the unity of which alone, the highest moral good can come to pass”. (Ak. 6:98)

28. Fichte:

“Our sense of our own dignity and power increases when we say to ourselves what every one of us can say: My existence is not in vain and without any purpose. I am a necessary link in that great chain which began at that moment when man first became fully conscious of his own existence and stretches into eternity. All these people have labored for my sake. All that were ever great, wise or noble – those benefactors of the human race whose names I find recorded in world history, as well as the many more whose services have survived their names: I have reaped their harvest. Upon the earth on which they lived I tread in the footsteps of those who bring blessings upon all who follow them. Whenever I wish, I can assume that lofty task which they had set for themselves: the task of making our fellow men ever wiser and happier. Where they had to stop, I can build further. I can bring nearer to completion that noble temple that they had to leave unfinished.”

“But,” someone may say, “I will have to stop too, just like they did.” Yes! And this is the loftiest thought of all: Once I assume this lofty task I will never complete it. Therefore, just as surely as it is my vocation to assume this task, I can never cease to *act* and thus I can never cease *to be*. That which is called “death” cannot interrupt my work; for my work must be completed, and it can never be completed in any amount of time. Consequently, my existence has no temporal limits: I am eternal. When I assumed this great task I laid hold of eternity at the same time. I lift my head boldly to the threatening stony heights, to the roaring cataract, and to the crashing clouds in their fire-red sea. “I am eternal!” I shout to them. “I defy your power! Rain everything down upon me! You earth, and you, heaven, mingle all of our elements in wild tumult. Foam and roar, and in savage combat pulverize the last dust mote of that body which I call my own. Along with its own unyielding project, my will shall hover boldly and indifferently over the wreckage of the universe. For I have seized my vocation and it is more permanent than you. It is eternal, and so too am I!”⁵

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⁵ Fichte, “Some Lectures concerning the Scholar’s Vocation”, in *Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. D. Breazeale, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 1988), pp. 144-184, pp. 168-69