

# The pursuit of the ideal : a mistaken endeavour?

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This essay is comprised of two parts. The first outlines Isaiah Berlin's changing approach to the question of psychological ideals and their relationship with the move towards a better society. Initially optimistic about mankind's ability to unite behind some common ideals, towards the end of his life Berlin comes to see that human ideals are ultimately too diverse for there to be any real agreement amongst the different people of the world. He argues that the best we can do is to seek some form of compromise. The second part of the essay concerns itself with the question of what it means to form an ideal, a question Berlin did not consider, and suggests that the forming of psychological ideals, far from leading to any kind of harmony actually is a recipe for producing conflict in the human mind.

This paper will concern itself primarily with questions arising from an article called 'The Pursuit of the Ideal' written by Isaiah Berlin towards the end of a life dedicated to philosophy and understanding. In this article Berlin discusses some of the various influences that helped to shape his thinking during his lifetime. Most importantly this concerned his approach to the question of ideals, of how to bring about a better society, which in turn led him on to a consideration of the question of whether or not humankind could possibly agree about such things.

In outlining his intellectual development and the different influences that impinged upon him, Berlin is quite frank and forthright. At no stage does he attempt to hang on to or defend ideas which he has come to see as redundant or mistaken. He willingly throws out the old and brings in the new as part of an ongoing evolutionary process which continues until his final realisation.

The first part of the paper examines the stages in this evolutionary process and looks at some of the major influences on Berlin's thinking, particularly with regard to ethics and morality. In the course of doing this we get a glimpse of some of the ideals that have preoccupied the human mind over the centuries and, perhaps, gain an insight into the reasons for Berlin's final damning response.

The second part of the paper looks at the fundamental question of ideals which concerned Berlin for much of his life, and suggests that perhaps he missed an avenue of enquiry of great importance. For the most part he was concerned with the different and varied psychological ideals that human beings pursue and with the question of reconciliation. But this avoids the intriguing question of what it is to have an ideal in the first place. More precisely, the question might be formulated thus : What exactly is the human mind doing when it constructs ideals and what is the relationship between those ideals and the stuff of everyday life? The second part of the paper endeavours to give some kind of intelligible answer to this question.

## Part one

Berlin opens his discussion in 'The Pursuit of the Ideal' by telling us that Russian writers such as Tolstoy were particularly appealing to him during his youth. "Their approach seemed to me essentially moral: they were concerned most deeply with what was responsible for injustice, oppression, falsity in human relations, imprisonment whether by stone walls or conformism—unprotesting submission to man-made yokes—moral blindness, egoism, cruelty, humiliation, bitter indignation, despair on the part of so many."<sup>1</sup>

Berlin felt that these injustices, this blindness on the part of human beings, was not just confined to people in one small part of the world but extended to most of mankind, and part of the attraction of these Russian writers rested on the fact that they "wished to know what would bring about the *opposite*<sup>2</sup> of this, a reign of truth, love, honesty, justice, security, personal relations based on the possibility of human dignity, decency, independence, freedom, spiritual fulfilment."<sup>3</sup>

Berlin found that while there was no agreement about what would bring about such a transformation in the human condition there did seem to be, at least in principle, an acceptance that such a transformation was achievable.

He suggests that some people like Tolstoy found the essential ingredients in the outlook of simple people, unspoiled by civilization. The world could be saved perhaps by looking to the Christian gospels, to the Sermon on the Mount.

“Others...put their faith in scientific rationalism, or in social and political revolution. Others again looked for answers in the teachings of the Orthodox theology or in liberal Western democracy, a return to old established values.”<sup>4</sup>

There seemed to be a strong belief that a general change for the better, a change away from a life of pain and despair, was a strong possibility. Quite what grounded these beliefs was perhaps not always clear, but they all seemed to point to the same conclusion.

“What was common to all these outlooks was the belief that solutions to the central problems existed, that one could discover them, and, with sufficient selfless effort, realize them on earth.”<sup>5</sup>

In his studies at university, Berlin found that many of the great philosophers including Socrates and Plato thought this too. “Socrates thought that if certainty could be established in our knowledge of the external world by rational methods...the same methods would surely yield equal certainty in the field of human behaviour — how to live, what to be.”<sup>6</sup>

The idea of certainty in the field of human behaviour, in the psychology of the human mind, appealed to Berlin at this time, and it came to him while studying the thoughts of Plato and Socrates that many, if not all, of the views he had so far considered appealed to a Platonic ideal.

“At some point I realized that what all these views had in common was a Platonic ideal : in the first place that, as in the sciences, all genuine questions must have one true answer and one only, all the rest being necessarily errors ; in the second place that there must be a dependable path towards the discovery of these truths ; in the third place that the true answers, when found, must necessarily be compatible with one another and form a single whole, for one truth cannot be incompatible with another — that we knew a priori. This kind of omniscience was the solution of the cosmic jigsaw puzzle. In the case of morals, we could then conceive what the perfect life must be, founded as it would be on a correct understanding of the rules that governed the universe.”<sup>7</sup>

The question of how anyone could ever acquire such perfect knowledge did not seem to matter all that much ; there would almost certainly be disagreement about it. The point was that the answers must exist because otherwise there would be no sense to the questions that everyone was asking.

As Berlin puts it, “The answers must be known to someone : perhaps Adam in Paradise knew ; perhaps we shall only reach them at the end of days ; if men cannot know them, perhaps the angels know ; and if not the angels, then God knows. The timeless truths must in principle be knowable.”<sup>8</sup>

At this stage Berlin does not question the propriety or otherwise of maintaining that there are indeed ‘timeless truths’ nor does he question the intelligibility of talking about ‘knowledge’ with regard to them. He does note, however, that for the nineteenth-century thinkers Hegel and Marx things were not quite so simple because for them there were no timeless truths.

“There was historical development, continuous change ; human horizons altered with each new step in the evolutionary ladder ; history was a drama with many acts ; it was moved by conflicts of forces, sometimes called dialectical, in the realms of both ideas and reality.”<sup>9</sup>

But despite the lack of belief in timeless truths Berlin sees sufficient optimism in the work of Hegel and Marx to justify a belief that things will come good in the end. That man will inevitably find a way.

“Yet after the inevitable setbacks, failures, relapses, returns to barbarism, Condorcet’s dream would come true. The drama would have a happy ending — man’s reason had achieved triumphs in the past, it could not be held back for ever.”<sup>10</sup>

So despite their seeming differences with the views considered earlier, the visions of Marx and

Hegel are, so it seems to Berlin, ultimately compatible with a vision of a definite final solution bringing a better, fairer, world. Berlin comments : “It was, at the very least, not impossible to conceive what such an earthly paradise could be, and if it was conceivable we could, at any rate, try to march towards it. That has been at the centre of ethical thought from the Greeks to Christian visionaries of the Middle Ages, from the Renaissance to progressive thought in the last century ; and, indeed, is believed by many to this day.”<sup>11</sup>

Grounded in this view of how things are unfolding is a sense that we are moving, or at least are attempting to move, in the direction of a better world. What Berlin does not explicitly state he at least implicitly implies : there is a fundamental belief in ethical progress, and at this stage in the development of his thought one might be forgiven for thinking that he shared this view. Whether he did or not is something of a mute point because it at this point that he encountered the works of Machiavelli, which provided Berlin with something of a shock, forcing him as it did to consider a possibility that he had not hitherto entertained.

Machiavelli thought it was possible, and desirable, to recreate a society in the fashion of the Roman Republic and he believed that to do this “one needed a ruling class of brave, resourceful, intelligent, gifted men who knew how to seize opportunities and use them, and citizens who were adequately protected, patriotic, proud of their state, epitomes of manly, pagan virtues.”<sup>12</sup> A society based on such attributes is certainly in sharp contrast to a society based on Christian values with the associated emphasis placed on humility, unworldliness, acceptance of suffering, and the hope of salvation in an after life.

It is clear to Machiavelli that if a state of the Roman type came into being it would not come about based on Christian virtues. Indeed, anyone living by such values would get short shrift from the typical inhabitant of the Roman Republic that attracts Machiavelli’s attention. As Berlin tells us : “Those who live by the precepts of Christian morality are bound to be trampled on by the ruthless pursuit of power on the part of men who alone can recreate and dominate the republic which Machiavelli wants to see. He does not condemn Christian virtues. He merely points out that the two moralities are incompatible, and he does not recognise an overarching criterion whereby we are enabled to decide the right life for men.”<sup>13</sup>

This presentation by Machiavelli crystallized Berlin’s thinking somewhat. He realized for the first time that it was not only possible for there to be an incompatibility between the great ideals pursued by mankind but that the present and the past both constitute periods in which this is in fact the case. Accordingly, humankind was not after all moving in the direction of some uniformly accepted good, but was divided amongst itself.

Just why Berlin had not been clear on this point based on the events and circumstances in his own life up to the time he encountered Machiavelli, need not concern us too much. We may register our surprise in the manner we deem appropriate, but the brute fact remains that Machiavelli’s analysis, based on the assumption that supreme values can actually conflict, constituted a real awakening for Berlin.

Indeed, whether we like it or not, values between groups do often conflict and it does appear that there is no easy way, certainly no definitive way, of deciding between them. Fortunately for Berlin however, as he struggles to adjust to a new view of the world, a deeper understanding of the issues he was confronting was at hand in the works of Giambattista Vico and Johann Gottfried Herder.

Vico suggests that every society has its own way of looking at the world and has a vision of what it is trying to achieve. Such ways of looking may differ from society to society, but each society has things to recommend it even though that society as such might not be easily compared to another society. The essential thing for Vico is that we try to understand each society rather than attempt to evaluate or judge it.

Herder’s view was perhaps more encompassing than Vico’s, taking in national cultures more generally across the globe and at differing periods in time. Herder maintained that each society had

its own 'centre' which set it apart from other societies. To understand a particular society or nation we should not look from a particular standpoint. Everything about a given society from the lifestyle of its inhabitants, its culture and values is intrinsic to that society. Some communities may be more similar to other communities and societies than to others, but they are basically to be understood in their own right because ultimately there are differences in what they desire to achieve and in what they fear and worship.

Berlin recognizes that this insistence on not looking from a particular standpoint lays itself open to a charge of propagating cultural or moral relativism but as he warms to their ideas he is adamant that Herder and Vico are not guilty of such a charge.

"Members of one culture can understand the values, the ideals, the forms of life of another culture or society, even those remote in time or space. They may find those values unacceptable, but if they open their minds sufficiently they can grasp how one might be a full human being, with whom one could communicate, and at the same time live in the light of values widely different from one's own, but which nevertheless one can see to be values, ends of life, by the realization of which men could be fulfilled."<sup>14</sup>

For Berlin straight relativism is simply a condition where preferences conflict and where nothing further can be said about that conflict. I prefer wine ; you prefer whisky. That's the end of it ; we simply agree to disagree. Herder and Vico's view is not like this, he claims, but instead is more of a pluralism. As such it incorporates a sense that there are many different ends that men may genuinely pursue, while recognising, at the same time, a sense of value in the lives of others, albeit in a world like the ancient Greeks or of medieval Japan, worlds and views that might be very different from that of ones own.

Berlin now sees clearly that forms of life can differ ; he sees that there are many ends which human beings pursue and moral principles they hold dear to, but he also is quite clear that they are not infinite in number and must fall within the frame of human possibilities. While such comments might seem vague or lacking in obvious meaning, there is no misunderstanding his next pronouncement on the matter. "What is clear is that values can clash—that is why civilizations are incompatible. They can be incompatible between cultures, or groups in the same culture, or between you and me. You believe in always telling the truth, no matter what : I do not, because I believe that it can sometimes be too painful and too destructive."<sup>15</sup>

He continues, "Both liberty and equality are among the primary goals pursued by human beings through many centuries ; but total liberty for wolves is death to the lambs, total liberty of the powerful, the gifted is not compatible with the rights to a decent existence of the weak and the less gifted. An artist, in order to create a masterpiece, may lead a life which plunges his family into misery and squalor to which he is indifferent. We may condemn him and declare that the masterpiece should be sacrificed to human needs, or we may take his side—but both attitudes embody values which for some men or women are ultimate, and which are intelligible to us all if we have any sympathy or understanding of human beings."<sup>16</sup>

For Berlin then, it now seems that we all must recognise that a clash of values is fundamental to the human condition and must see that there is no escape from such a position. Such a clash of values, for him, actually constitutes the essence of humanity. Moreover, he no longer sees any possibility of making a kind of perfect whole out of the mishmash of different values and aims that form the centre of different cultures and world views. In fact Berlin goes further than this and finds the whole suggestion that there might be a perfect world unintelligible. "The notion of the perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things coexist, seems to me to be not merely unattainable—that is a truism—but conceptually incoherent ; I do not know what is meant by a harmony of this kind."<sup>17</sup>

Further to this 'fatal theoretical objection' to the idea that pursuing the creation of a perfect state be the proper goal of human endeavour, Berlin sees important practical obstacles which must accompany any attempt at change. Each new 'solution' creates a new situation which breeds its own

new needs, new demands and these usually cannot be predicted in advance. We cannot foretell the consequences of consequences ; we can push off in a completely new direction, but we do not know what will then happen. The consequences of such action will be dependent on what the new brew throws up ; we cannot legislate for them in advance, but only react or at best respond when they arise.

What this means for Berlin's analysis is that talk of a final solution is flawed on two fronts ; it is impracticable and ultimately incoherent. Anyone who for whatever reason or motive seeks to unite mankind is, for Berlin, doomed to failure. The only certainty is that millions may get slaughtered in the process as testified to by the gas chamber, the gulag, genocide and all the evil for which the last century will be remembered. The ideal for which these lives were lost in the past and for which further lives may well be lost in the future, remains unrealised, elusive and ultimately unattainable. As Berlin so eloquently puts it : "The eggs are broken, and the habit of breaking them grows but the omelette remains invisible. Sacrifices for shorter goals, coercion, if men's plight is desperate enough and truly requires such measures, may be justified. But holocausts for the sake of distant goals, that is a cruel mockery of all that men hold dear, now and at all times."<sup>18</sup>

Great goods, according to this view, can and do collide and the belief in the possibility of realising ultimate harmony is grounded in fallacy. And Berlin thinks that recognising this would free us to look for some sort of compromise, some sort of balance that might prevent the occurrence of intolerable situations. Giving up universal values would still leave most societies able to agree on other things. Most would denounce slavery and ritual murder and the Nazi gas chambers even if there were disagreement in other areas. Searching for a compromise is for Berlin the only sensible way forward since the search for perfection will always lead to bloodshed. Berlin ends by saying :

"Of course social or political collisions will take place, the mere conflict of positive values alone makes this unavoidable. Yet, they can I believe, be minimized by promoting and preserving an uneasy equilibrium, which is constantly threatened and in constant need of repair - that alone is the precondition for decent societies and morally acceptable behaviour, otherwise we are bound to lose our way."<sup>19</sup>

Some might say that we have already lost our way and that what Berlin suggests is not only begging the question but has, in any case, no real chance of ever becoming a reality. What is certain is that whatever those of a given epoch say or do there is no guarantee that any changes brought about at a particular time will continue to hold good in the future, however near or far away that 'future' may be.

All of this notwithstanding, Berlin's realization is a sobering and compelling one, even though it may remain to many still only another point of view. From a personal viewpoint, I find much of interest in what Berlin has to say, despite finding it a little surprising that the conclusions he reaches should come so late in his life.

Berlin recognizes that values, ideals, can and do conflict and he sees bargaining for some sort of compromise as a possible solution for the prevention of that conflict, but he doesn't feel compelled to push the question any further. But surely, when one sees the plurality of ideals that different cultures, societies and even the citizens of which they are made up, define themselves in terms of, one fundamental question that one is forced to confront concerns the very forming of an ideal in the first place.

Berlin never sees the need to ask what it is to form and pursue an ideal. To observe that human beings do form and pursue ideals is one thing but to ask what they are doing when they form ideals is something different altogether. After all seeing the diverse and varied ideals that human beings have pursued in the past and continue to pursue in the present, might one not wonder whether or not it was the pursuit of the ideal itself which rooted the conflict in the hearts and minds of mankind?

To ask this, of course, is not to request a list of all the different ideals that humankind has pursued but is an enquiry into what is going on in the human mind when it creates an ideal, when it aims at becoming better, and is to ask what the relationship is between the ideal and the stuff of

ordinary life out of which it is created.

By simply accepting that, as a matter of fact, people do hold ideals which are often incompatible with the ideals held by others, and by considering how we, throughout the world, might come to terms with, and accommodate this plurality, Berlin's position can be seen as being fundamentally a pragmatic one. It reduces to the question of how we make the best of a poor situation and, at bottom, considers the best way to police ourselves.

As a form of control, some may see nothing wrong with this, but by never asking the question of what exactly an ideal is we miss the chance to find out if it is necessary to form them at all, and more importantly, whether or not forming them may be the source of the whole problem. Let us now turn to a consideration of this question.

## Part Two

I would like first of all to look at some very specific examples of psychological ideals and start with something that, perhaps, many people at whatever epoch in the evolution of man might be able to understand. I'm thinking in the first instance of the feeling of greed. Let's suppose I am greedy and acquisitive. I always want more than I've got and am always looking for ways to get more. This might be more money, food, clothes, books, information, a bigger and better place to live a better car and so on. I notice I am greedy and don't like what I see and I begin to think I ought to change, become better in some way. I start to project an image of a better way to be. Rather than being greedy I want to be its opposite, that is I want to be non-greedy or not greedy. It seems to me that in so far as I am able to become this, I would become someone who was not looking for more, someone who was not attempting to acquire or get more. The non-greedy person does not have such thoughts, and does not pursue such things ; this, at any rate, is how I imagine it to be.

So this idea of being non-greedy rather appeals to me and I give it a special status. It is what I would like to be. I make of it an ideal and I measure my behaviour in so far as it accords with or departs from this measure. It might require me at times to be quite philanthropic and accordingly some days I may be quite pleased with myself, with what I have achieved, whilst other days I may be disappointed for failing to live up to the standard I have set.

So while all this might be cause for celebration on certain occasions, on others it would also be cause for regret and possible recrimination as I either 'succeed' or 'fail' to live up to the requirements of my self-made ideal. Alternating between states of celebration and those of regret could in such circumstances be an almost 'natural' way of going about daily life. But would this be a case of a greedy person becoming non-greedy? In fact, is that possible at all? What I have described is the case of the greedy person — me — following a code of behaviour, pursuing an ideal, to try to become something other than what he is. So what we are left with is a rather absurd situation : a greedy person trying, by following an ideal created by thought, to become something else, something which he is not. And it is the trying to achieve this reconciliation of things that are not reconcilable that causes the problems because there is a separation between what the person actually is and what he would like to be. Trying to build a bridge across this space has caused conflict and contradiction in the human mind over the centuries.

We see similar tendencies at work in the mind when it comes to the question of violence. And here I do not just mean physical violence but include more specifically the way in which many of us are violent in the content of our speech. We order people to do certain tasks in an unnecessary manner ; we shout and force our opinions on others and while we may present a meek and submissive demeanour to those we consider our superiors, we are aggressive and demanding of the people we feel are below us. Indeed to look down on someone at all is already a form of aggression, a form of violence. We continually try to get our own way at the expense of other people, we push and manipulate in order to do this.

We may not recognize all of these traits as being ones that we possess, but we will probably

admit to some of them. And in so far as we do so we may feel inclined to dislike the fact that we are that way. Preferring not to be violent at all we may try to pursue the idea of non-violence. This does not correspond to the way that we actually are, it corresponds instead to a way we would like to be. And it is here that the ideal of non-violence comes into being. Once again the person sees the way things actually are and doesn't like what he sees. But rather than stay with that state, there is a desire to move away, a desire to avoid what actually is the case ; it is too unpleasant to remain with. Instead, a preferred state is projected, a state which is the opposite of the actual, a state which thought has created and made into an ideal. And the person tries to behave in accord with this thought projected state, this ideal. Again, we see the movement away from the actual, which is to say the way the person actually is, towards some imagined, self created opposite : an attempt to avoid the actual by dwelling in the imagined. But causing conflict in the process because any 'lapses' in conduct, of which there are certain to be numerous cases, will be met with by self-disapproval as each one of us tries to come to terms with the tension of being one thing while thinking we should, or ought to, be something else. Once again the creation of the ideal makes this inner tension, this inner conflict, not simply a possibility but an inevitability.

Again, let's suppose that I am envious, that I feel envy. I see things that others have and I wish quite strongly that I had them too. I envy them that possession, be it of a car, a house, a way of being, a style of dressing or in an ability that they possess. On another front I might envy the fact that others have money and I don't or that they behave openly and honestly while I am devious, hypocritical and calculating. Seeing this as an unpleasant way to be, I decide to change. I will no longer be like that, I will be completely the opposite. I won't feel envy of other people's possessions or abilities as I did in the past. I will try to think positively and be completely different from how I was. Or so at least I think, or imagine.

However, this decision, whatever I may think, will be rooted in that feeling of envy ; it will spring from it. In fact the very desire of wanting to be something that I am not may simply be a new channel for that feeling of envy. The new idea of non-envy, the new idea of not acting enviously has come out of that original feeling of envy. My mind, by creating the opposite, has given birth to yet another ideal. And I 'succeed' or 'fail' in my own judgement of the issue in so far as I either succumb to or manage to avoid this feeling I have denounced. But the fundamental fact remains that I am envious, and it is this envious mind that has created the idea or ideal of its opposite. And being an idea, this opposite is not a fact but an unreal state that I desire to attain. So, as before, we have the creation of tension as we struggle to bridge the divide between what we are and what we would like to be ; we contort and squirm in an attempt to reconcile the fact of what we are with the palpable non-fact of the ideal we wish we could attain.

J. Krishnamurti spoke extensively on the psychology of the human mind and endlessly pointed out the dangers of comparing what we actually are with some other ideal or preferred state. "Why do you compare yourself with another? This comparison has been taught from childhood. In every school A is compared with B, and A destroys himself trying to be like B. When you do not compare at all, when there is no ideal, no opposite, no factor of duality, when you no longer struggle to be different from what you are — what has happened to your mind? Your mind has ceased to create an opposite and has become highly intelligent, highly sensitive, capable of immense passion — passion which is vital energy — and you cannot do anything without passion."<sup>20</sup>

He continues, "Why do we have duality at all? There is, of course, duality in nature — man and woman, light and shade, night and day — but inwardly, psychologically, why do we have duality? Please think this out with me, don't wait for me to tell you. You have to exercise your mind to find out. My words are merely a mirror in which to observe yourself. Why do we have this psychological duality? Is it that we have been brought up always to compare 'what is' with 'what should be'? We have been conditioned in what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad, what is moral and what is immoral. Has this duality come into being because we believe that thinking about the opposite of violence, the opposite of envy, of jealousy, of meanness, will help us to get rid of

those things? Do we use the opposite as a lever to get rid of what is? Or is it an escape from the actual? Do you use the opposite as a means of avoiding the actual which you don't know how to deal with? Or is it because you have been told by thousands of years of propaganda that you must have an ideal—the opposite of 'what is'—in order to cope with the present? When you have an ideal you think it helps you get rid of 'what is', but it never does. You may preach non-violence for the rest of your life and all the time be sowing the seeds of violence. You have a concept of what you should be and how you should act, and all the time you are in fact acting quite differently ; so you see that principles, beliefs and ideals must inevitably lead to hypocrisy and a dishonest life. It is the ideal that creates the opposite to what is, so if you know how to be with 'what is', then the opposite is not necessary. Trying to become like somebody else, or like your ideal, is one of the main causes of contradiction, confusion, conflict. A mind that is confused, whatever it does, at any level, will remain confused ; any action born of confusion leads to further confusion. I see this very clearly ; I see it as clearly as I see an immediate physical danger. So what happens? I cease to act in terms of confusion any more. Therefore inaction is complete action."<sup>21</sup>

There are indeed opposites as Krishnamurti suggests, opposites such as day and night, right and left, up and down and many others that have a factual base and help us go about our daily business of living. And we see clearly that such opposites are defined in terms of each other ; the one doesn't exist without the other. But in the psychological realm, are there really opposites at all? We feel fear, anger, greed, etc, but can we really say that their opposites exist? Is there an opposite of fear of anger of greed? Is there an opposite of goodness of joy? I think not. When I have no fear, is this a feeling of courage? Surely, when I have no fear, what we have is not courage but something completely different. It is not feeling the opposite of fear. Opposites are the product of thought, the creation of a mind that wants to move away from what it sees. And it is in this way that we create the ideal ; we imagine the 'what should be' as a model for our behaviour, a model to be employed as a means of changing the way we actually are. But this process of thought which has preoccupied human kind for centuries—well past the period of time that Berlin considers—actually only succeeds in bringing about confusion and internal unrest in each of our hearts. All of which is no recipe for realizing harmony in society.

Krishnamurti is quite certain that ideals serve only to divide people.

"...Most people have ideals. Why? The Marxists, the totalitarian attitude, the future is all important, not the present. The ideals of Lenin, Marx, Mao ; why have ideals,...why have ideals become so important?"<sup>22</sup>

He continues : "Most human beings throughout the world have unfortunately accepted ideals. Perhaps you also have many, many ideals. And to have ideals is considered highly respectable, highly noble, gives one great character and so on, this phrase throughout the world—a man of ideals. I wonder what is the function of ideals at all, if you have any. The speaker hasn't any because ideals imply, if you go into it very carefully, the avoidance of 'what is', what actually is going on. You are translating what is going on according to 'what should be' . The 'what should be' is not the actual. The 'what should be', the ideal, brings about a conflict between 'what is' and 'what should be'."<sup>23</sup>

Once again the suggestion is that having ideals is the cause of tremendous conflict, and conflict of any kind surely is not a welcome visitor to the hearts or minds of anyone of us. If Krishnamurti is right, and the current writer's feeling is that he is, then what we have to do is not to look to ideals but to look at the actual state of our inward conflict. In so far as I am greedy or envious or violent, etc, it is only by staying with these states or feelings that I can hope to come to any understanding of them. There should be no condemnation of any feeling and equally no praising of them either. Watching and staying with these feelings is, surely, the first step to a real understanding of them.

The movement from examining the feelings in the mind of an individual person to looking at society as a whole is not as great as it might appear. What after all is each one of us, except to a large extent a mirror of the society in which we have our being. Which, of course, is not to say that that is all we need, or can ever, be.



As we have seen, the societies in the periods of history that Berlin examines are all seen as having something wrong with them. The writers he looks at criticise their societies for being amongst other things, unjust, oppressive, false, immoral, barbaric, avaricious, etc, and they all project better ways to behave — in short, fairer and more desirable societies.

The actual state of society as it is considered at any given period in history is attacked and deplored and other ideal ways of acting or behaving are put forward. To the extent that this involves making certain rules and agreements about how to make day to day living more efficient and agreeable, this might be to the good of all. We can agree to drive on the right or the left for example ; we can try to feed and clothe everyone and make sure that each one of us has somewhere to live and a means of earning our daily bread. In so far as measures like this constitute aims to be worked for, we can indeed make sense of a model to be followed. For example, there surely can be ideal transport systems, building designs and computer networks, etc. But in so far as we want to change ourselves, our characters, our psychological dispositions by trying to imitate a way of behaviour seen as better, some ideal or other, we are surely making a terrible mistake.

Each one of the writers that Berlin considers, and to a large extent Berlin himself too, wants the physical conditions of humankind to improve to some degree or other, but also desires changes in the psychology of the human mind. Berlin, personally, denies that the many ideals humankind aspire to have any chance of being reconciled and for this reason he recommended that we basically make the best of a very bad situation by agreeing to some form of compromise. But what he did not recognise was that in recommending a movement from a real and actual situation to a proffered ideal or fictitious one, the writers he considered were all generating recipes that could only lead to more conflict and turmoil.

In sharing a common desire to move away from an actual psychological state to a more preferable or desirable one, all of these writers, who themselves span no short period of time, exhibit the same general tendency as others across the centuries before them, to pursue the elusive, psychological ideal. My concern in this paper has been to suggest that such a pursuit is not only doomed to failure but rests on a profound mistake.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 2.  
<sup>2</sup>The italics are mine ; the reason for using them will become apparent in Part two.  
<sup>3</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 2.  
<sup>4</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 3.  
<sup>5</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 2.  
<sup>6</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 2.

- <sup>7</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 5.  
<sup>8</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 3.  
<sup>9</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 5.  
<sup>10</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 6.  
<sup>11</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 5.  
<sup>12</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 7.  
<sup>13</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 7.  
<sup>14</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 9.  
<sup>15</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 10.  
<sup>16</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 9.  
<sup>17</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 12.  
<sup>18</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 14.  
<sup>19</sup>Berlin, I.1998, 16.  
<sup>20</sup>Krishnamurti, J. (1991) CD ROM, *Freedom from the known*, 64.  
<sup>21</sup>Krishnamurti, J.1991 CD ROM, *Freedom from the known*, 64.  
<sup>22</sup>Krishnamurti, J.1991 CD ROM, 1<sup>st</sup> Public Talk, Ojai, 1978, 16.  
<sup>23</sup>Krishnamurti, J.1991 CD ROM, 3<sup>rd</sup> Public Talk, Ojai, 1978, 6.

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