

ISAIAH BERLIN

THE CROOKED TIMBER OF HUMANITY

'To read Berlin is to sit at an unlit window and see the landscape
of European thought illuminated by a spectacular display of fireworks.'

Ian McIntyre, *Independent*



possibility that the Christian and the pagan answers to moral or political questions might both be correct given the premises from which they start; that these premises were not demonstrably false, only incompatible; and that no single overarching standard or criterion was available to decide between, or reconcile, these wholly opposed moralities. This was found somewhat troubling by those who believed themselves to be Christians but wished to give unto Caesar what was Caesar's. A sharp division between public and private life, or politics and morality, never works well. Too many territories have been claimed by both. This has been and can be an agonising problem, and, as often happened in such cases, men were none too anxious to face it.

There was also another angle from which these assumptions were questioned. The assumptions, I repeat, are those of natural law: that human nature is a static, unaltering essence, that its ends are eternal, unaltering and universal for all men, everywhere, at all times, and can be known, and perhaps fulfilled, by those who possess the appropriate kind of knowledge.

When the new nation-states arose in the course, and partly as a result, of the Reformation in the sixteenth century in the west and north of Europe, some among the lawyers engaged in formulating and defending the claims and laws of these kingdoms—for the most part reformers, whether out of opposition to the authority of the Church of Rome, or, in some cases, to the centralising policies of the King of France—began to argue that Roman law, with its claim to universal authority, was nothing to them: they were not Romans; they were Franks, Celts, Norsemen; they had their own Frankish, Batavian, Scandinavian traditions; they lived in Languedoc; they had their Languedoc customs from time immemorial; what was Rome to them? In France they were descendants of Frankish conquerors, their ancestors had subdued the Gallo-Romans; they had inherited, they wished to recognise, only their own Frankish or Burgundian or Helvetic laws; what Roman law had to say was neither here nor there; it did not apply to them. Let the Italians

obey Rome. Why should Franks, Teutons, descendants of Viking pirates, accept the dominion of a single, universal, foreign legal code? Different nations, different roots, different laws, different peoples, different communities, different ideals. Each had its own way of living—what right had one to dictate to the others? Least of all the Pope, whose claims to spiritual authority the reformers denied. This broke the spell of one world, one universal law, and consequently one universal goal for all men, everywhere, at all times. The perfect society which Frankish warriors, or even their descendants, conceived as their ideal might be very different from the Utopian vision of an Italian, ancient or modern, and wholly unlike that of an Indian or a Swede or a Turk. Henceforth, the spectre of relativism makes its dreaded appearance, and with it the beginning of the dissolution of faith in the very concept of universally valid goals, at least in the social and political sphere. This was accompanied, in due course, by a sense that there might be not only a historical or political but some logical flaw in the very idea of a universe equally acceptable to communities of different origin, with different traditions, character, outlook, concepts, categories, views of life.

But again, the implications of this were not fully spelt out, largely, perhaps, because of the enormous triumph at this very time of the natural sciences. As a result of the revolutionary discoveries of Galileo and Newton and the work of other mathematicians and physicists and biologists of genius, the external world was seen as a single cosmos, such that, to take the best-known example, by the application of relatively few laws the movement and position of every particle of matter could be precisely determined. For the first time it became possible to organise a chaotic mass of observational data into a single, coherent, perfectly orderly system. Why should not the same methods be applied to human matters, to morals, to politics, to the organisation of society, with equal success? Why should it be assumed that men belong to some order outside the system of nature? What holds good for material objects, for animals and

plants and minerals, in zoology, botany, chemistry, physics, astronomy – all new sciences well on the way to being unified, which proceed from hypotheses about observed facts and events to testable scientific conclusions, and together form a coherent and scientific system – why should not this also apply to human problems? Why cannot one create a science or sciences of man and here also provide solutions as clear and certain as those obtained in the sciences of the external world?

This was a novel, revolutionary and highly plausible proposal which the thinkers of the Enlightenment, particularly in France, accepted with natural enthusiasm. It was surely reasonable to suppose that man has an examinable nature, capable of being observed, analysed, tested like other organisms and forms of living matter. The programme seemed clear: one must scientifically find out what man consists of, and what he needs for his growth and for his satisfaction. When one had discovered what he is and what he requires, one will then ask where this last can be found; and then, by means of the appropriate inventions and discoveries, supply men's wants, and in this way achieve, if not total perfection, at any rate a far happier and more rational state of affairs than at present prevails. Why does it not exist? Because stupidity, prejudice, superstition, ignorance, the passions which darken reason, greed and fear and lust for domination, and the barbarism, cruelty, intolerance, fanaticism which go with them, have led to the deplorable condition in which men have been forced to live too long. Failure, unavoidable or deliberate, to observe what there is in the world has robbed man of the knowledge needed to improve his life. Scientific knowledge alone can save us. This is the fundamental doctrine of the French Enlightenment, a great liberating movement which in its day eliminated a great deal of cruelty, superstition, injustice and obscurantism.

In due course this great wave of rationalism led to an inevitable reaction. It seems to me a historical fact that whenever rationalism goes far enough there often tends to occur some kind of emotional resistance, a 'backlash', which springs from

that which is irrational in man. This took place in Greece in the fourth and third centuries BC, when the great Socratic schools produced their magnificent rationalistic systems: seldom, we are told by historians of Greek cults, did mystery religions, occultism, irrationalism, mysticisms of all kinds flourish so richly. So too the powerful and rigid edifice of Roman law, one of the great achievements of human civilisation, and, side by side with it, the great legal-religious structure of ancient Judaism were followed by a passionate, emotional resistance, culminating in the rise and triumph of Christianity. In the later Middle Ages there was, similarly, reaction to the great logical constructions of the schoolmen. Something not dissimilar occurred during the Reformation; and finally, following the triumphs of the scientific spirit in the west, a powerful counter-movement arose some two centuries ago.

This reaction came mainly from Germany. Something needs to be said about the social and spiritual situation in the Germany of that time. By the seventeenth century, even before the devastation of the Thirty Years War, German-speaking countries found themselves, for reasons which I do not have the competence to discuss, culturally inferior to their neighbours across the Rhine. During the entire seventeenth century, the French seemed to be dominant in every sphere of life, both spiritual and material. Their military strength, their social and economic organisation, their thinkers, scientists and philosophers, painters and composers, their poets, dramatists, architects – their excellence in the general arts of life – these placed them at the head of all Europe. Well might they be excused if then and later they identified civilisation as such with their own culture.

If, during the seventeenth century, French influence reached an unexampled height, there was a notable flowering of culture in other western countries also: this is plainly true of England in the late Elizabethan and Stuart period; it coincided with the golden age of Spain, and the great artistic and scientific renaissance in the Low Countries. Italy, if not perhaps at the

height which it reached in the quattrocento, produced artists, and especially scientists, of rare achievement. Even Sweden in the far north was beginning to stir.

The German-speaking peoples could not boast of anything similar. If you ask what were the most distinguished contributions made to European civilisation in the seventeenth century by the German-speaking lands, there is little enough to tell: apart from architecture and the isolated genius of Kepler, original talent seemed to flow only in theology; the poets, scholars, thinkers, seldom rose above mediocrity; Leibniz seems to have few native predecessors. This can, I believe, be explained, at least in part, by the economic decline and political divisions in Germany; but I am concerned only to stress the facts themselves. Even though the general level of German education remained quite high, life and art and thought remained profoundly provincial. The attitude to the German lands of the advanced nations of the west, particularly of the French, seemed to be a kind of patronising indifference. In due course the humiliated Germans began feebly to imitate their French models, and this, as often happens, was followed by a cultural reaction. The wounded national consciousness asserted itself, sometimes in a somewhat aggressive fashion.

This is a common enough response on the part of backward nations who are looked on with too much arrogant contempt, with too great an air of conscious superiority, by the more advanced societies. By the beginning of the eighteenth century some among the spiritual leaders in the devout, inward-looking German principalities began to counter-attack. This took the form of pouring contempt on the worldly success of the French: these Frenchmen and their imitators elsewhere could boast of only so much empty show. The inner life, the life of the spirit, concerned with the relation of man to man, to himself, to God – that alone was of supreme importance; the empty, materialistic French wisacres had no sense of true values – of what alone men lived by. Let them have their arts, their sciences, their *salons*, their wealth and their vaunted glory. All this was, in the end,

dross – the perishable goods of the corruptible flesh. The *philosophes* were blind leaders of the blind, remote from all conception of what alone truly mattered, the dark, agonising, infinitely rewarding descent into the depths of man's own sinful but immortal soul, made in the semblance of divine nature itself. This was the realm of the devout, inward vision of the German soul.

Gradually this German self-image grew in intensity, fed by what might be called a kind of nationalist resentment. The philosopher, poet, critic, pastor Johann Gottfried Herder was perhaps the first wholly articulate prophet of this attitude, and elevated this cultural self-consciousness into a general principle. Beginning as a literary historian and essayist, he maintained that values were not universal; every human society, every people, indeed every age and civilisation, possesses its own unique ideals, standards, way of living and thought and action. There are no immutable, universal, eternal rules or criteria of judgement in terms of which different cultures and nations can be graded in some single order of excellence, which would place the French – if Voltaire was right – at the top of the ladder of human achievement and the Germans far below them in the twilight regions of religious obscurantism and within the narrow limits of provincialism and dim-witted rural existence. Every society, every age, has its own cultural horizons. Every nation has its own traditions, its own character, its own face. Every nation has its own centre of moral gravity, which differs from that of every other: there and only there its happiness lies – in the development of its own national needs, its own unique character.

There is no compelling reason for seeking to imitate foreign models, or returning to some remote past. Every age, every society, differs in its goals and habits and values from every other. The conception of human history as a single universal process of struggle towards the light, the later stages and embodiments of which are necessarily superior to the earlier, where the primitive is necessarily inferior to the sophisticated,

is an enormous fallacy. Homer is not a primitive Ariosto; Shakespeare is not a rudimentary Racine (these are not Herder's examples). To judge one culture by the standards of another argues a failure of imagination and understanding. Every culture has its own attributes, which must be grasped in and for themselves. In order to understand a culture, one must employ the same faculties of sympathetic insight with which we understand one another, without which there is neither love nor friendship, nor true human relationships. One man's attitude towards another is, or should be, based on perceiving what he is in himself, uniquely, not what he has in common with all other men; only the natural sciences abstract what is common, generalise. Human relations are founded on recognition of individuality, which can, perhaps, never be exhaustively described, still less analysed; so it is with understanding communities, cultures, epochs, and what they are and strive for and feel and suffer and create, how they express themselves and see themselves and think and act.

Men congregate in groups because they are conscious of what unites them — bonds of common descent, language, soil, collective experience; these bonds are unique, impalpable and ultimate. Cultural frontiers are natural to men, spring from the interplay of their inner essence and environment and historical experience. Greek culture is uniquely and inexhaustibly Greek; India, Persia, France are what they are, not something else. Our culture is our own; cultures are incommensurable; each is as it is, each of infinite value, as souls are in the sight of God. To eliminate one in favour of another, to subjugate a society and destroy a civilisation, as the great conquerors have done, is a monstrous crime against the right to be oneself, to live in the light of one's own ideal values. If you exile a German and plant him in America, he will be unhappy; he will suffer because people can be happy, can function freely, only among those who understand them. To be lonely is to be among men who do not know what you mean. Exile, solitude, is to find yourself among people whose words, gestures, handwriting are alien to your

own, whose behaviour, reactions, feelings, instinctive responses, and thoughts and pleasures and pains, are too remote from yours, whose education and outlook, the tone and quality of whose lives and being, are not yours. There are many things which men do have in common, but that is not what matters most. What individualises them, makes them what they are, makes communication possible, is what they do not have in common with all the others. Differences, peculiarities, nuances, individual character are all in all.

This is a novel doctrine. Herder identified cultural differences and cultural essence and the very idea of historical development very differently from Voltaire. What, for him, makes Germans German is the fact that the way in which they eat or drink, dispense justice, write poetry, worship, dispose of property, get up and sit down, obtain their food, wear their clothes, sing, fight wars, order political life, all have a certain common character, a qualitative property, a pattern which is solely German, in which they differ from the corresponding activities of the Chinese or the Portuguese. No one of these peoples or cultures is, for Herder, superior to any of the others, they are merely different; since they are different, they seek different ends; therein is both their specific character and their value. Values, qualities of character, are not commensurable: an order of merit which presupposes a single measuring-rod is, for Herder, evidence of blindness to what makes human beings human. A German cannot be made happy by efforts to turn him into a second-rate Frenchman. Icelanders will not be made happy by life in Denmark, or Europeans by emigrating to America. Men can develop their full powers only by continuing to live where they and their ancestors were born, to speak their language, live their lives within the framework of the customs of their society and culture. Men are not self-created: they are born into a stream of tradition, above all of language, which shapes their thoughts and feelings, which they cannot shed or change, which forms their inner life. The qualities which men have in common are not sufficient to ensure the fulfilment of a

man's or a people's nature, which depends at least as much on the characteristics due to the place, the time and the culture to which men uniquely belong; to ignore or obliterate these characteristics is to destroy men's souls and bodies equally. 'I am not here to think, but to be, feel, live!' For Herder every action, every form of life, has a pattern which differs from that of every other. The natural unit for him is what he calls *das Volk*, the people, the chief constituents of which are soil and language, not race or colour or religion. That is Herder's lifelong sermon – after all, he was a Protestant pastor – to the German-speaking peoples.

uh ah.
But if this is so, if the doctrine of the French Enlightenment – and indeed, the central western assumption, of which I have spoken, that all true values are immutable and timeless and universal – needs revising so drastically, then there is something radically wrong with the idea of a perfect society. The basic reason for this is not to be found among those which were usually advanced against Utopian ideas – that such a society cannot be attained because men are not wise or skilful or virtuous enough, or cannot acquire the requisite degree of knowledge, or resolution, or, tainted as they are with original sin, cannot attain perfection in this life – but is altogether different. The idea of a single, perfect society of all mankind must be internally self-contradictory, because the Valhalla of the Germans is necessarily different from the ideal of future life of the French, because the paradise of the Muslims is not that of Jews or Christians, because a society in which a Frenchman would attain to harmonious fulfilment is a society which to a German might prove suffocating. But if we are to have as many types of perfection as there are types of culture, each with its ideal constellation of virtues, then the very notion of the possibility of a single perfect society is logically incoherent. This, I think, is the beginning of the modern attack on the notion of Utopia, Utopia as such.

The romantic movement in Germany, which owed a great deal to the influence of the philosopher Fichte, contributed its own powerful impetus to this new and genuinely revolutionary

Weltanschauung. For the young Friedrich Schlegel, or Tieck, or Novalis, values, ethical, political, aesthetic, are not objectively given, not fixed stars in some Platonic firmament, eternal, immutable, which men can discover only by employing the proper method – metaphysical insight, scientific investigation, philosophical argument or divine revelation. Values are generated by the creative human self. Man is, above all, a creature endowed not only with reason but with will. Will is the creative function of man. The new model of man's nature is conceived by analogy with the new conception of artistic creation, no longer bound by the objective rules drawn from idealised universal nature ('la bella natura') or by the eternal truths of classicism, or natural law, or a divine lawgiver. If one compares classical doctrines – even those of such late neoclassical, somewhat Platonist, theorists as Joshua Reynolds or Jean-Philippe Rameau – with those of their romantic opponents, this emerges clearly. Reynolds, in his famous lectures on the Great Style, said in effect that, if you are painting a king, you must be guided by the conception of royalty. David, King of Israel, may in life have been of mean stature and have had physical defects. But you may not so paint him, because he is a king. Therefore you must paint him as a royal personage; and royalty is an eternal, immutable attribute, unitary and equally accessible to the vision of all men, at all times, everywhere; somewhat like a Platonic 'idea', beyond the reach of the empirical eye, it does not alter with the passage of time or difference of outlook, and the business of the painter or sculptor is to penetrate the veil of appearance, to conceive of the essence of pure royalty, and convey it on canvas, or in marble or wood or whatever medium the artist chooses to use. Similarly, Rameau was convinced that the business of a composer was to use sound to evince harmony – the eternal mathematical proportions which are embodied in the nature of things, in the great cosmos – not given to the mortal ear, yet that which gives the pattern of musical sounds the order and beauty which the inspired artist creates – or rather reproduces, 'imitates' – as best he can.

Not so those who are influenced by the new romantic doctrine. The painter creates; he does not copy. He does not imitate; he does not follow rules; he makes them. Values are not discovered, they are created; not found, but made by an act of imaginative, creative will, as works of art, as policies, plans, patterns of life are created. By whose imagination, whose will? Fichte speaks of the self, the ego; as a rule he identifies it with a transcendent, infinite, world-spirit of which the human individual is a mere spatiotemporal, mortal expression, a finite centre which derives its reality from the spirit, to perfect union with which it seeks to attain. Others identified this self with some other superpersonal spirit or force – the nation, the true self in which the individual is only an element; or, again, the people (Rousseau comes near to doing this) or the state (as Hegel does); or it is identified with a culture, or the *Zeitgeist* (a conception greatly mocked by Goethe in his *Faust*), or a class which embodies the progressive march of history (as in Marx), or some other, equally impalpable, movement or force or group. This somewhat mysterious source is held to generate and transform values which I am bound to follow because, to the degree to which I am, at my best or truest, an agent of God, or of history, or progress, or the nation, I recognise them as my own. This constitutes a sharp break with the whole of previous tradition, for which the true and the beautiful, the noble and the ignoble, the right and the wrong, duty, sin, ultimate good, were unalterable, ideal values and, like their opposites, created eternal and identical for all men; in the old formula, *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*: the only problem was how to know them and, knowing, realise or avoid them, do good and eschew evil.

But if these values are not uncreated, but generated by my culture or by my nation or by my class, they will differ from the values generated by your culture, your nation, your class; they are not universal, and may clash. If the values generated by Germans are different from values generated by Portuguese, if the values generated by the ancient Greeks are different from

those of modern Frenchmen, then a relativity deeper than any enunciated by the sophists or Montesquieu or Hume will destroy the single moral and intellectual universe. Aristotle, Herder declared, is 'theirs' – Leibniz is 'ours'. Leibniz speaks to us Germans, not Socrates or Aristotle. Aristotle was a great thinker, but we cannot return to him: his world is not ours. So, three-quarters of a century later, it was laid down that if my true values are the expression of my class – the bourgeoisie – and not of their class – the proletariat – then the notion that all values, all true answers to questions, are compatible with each other cannot be true, since my values will inevitably clash with yours, because the values of my class are not the values of yours. As the values of the ancient Romans are not those of modern Italians, so the moral world of medieval Christianity is not that of liberal democrats, and, above all, the world of the workers is not that of their employers. The concept of a common good, valid for all mankind, rests on a cardinal mistake.

The notion that there exists a celestial, crystalline sphere, unaffected by the world of change and appearance, in which mathematical truths and moral or aesthetic values form a perfect harmony, guaranteed by indestructible logical links, is now abandoned, or at best is ignored. That is at the heart of the romantic movement, the extreme expression of which is the self-assertion of the individual creative personality as the maker of its own universe; we are in the world of rebels against convention, of the free artists, the Satanic outlaws, the Byronic outcasts, the 'pale and fevered generation' celebrated by German and French romantic writers of the early nineteenth century, the stormy Promethean heroes who reject the laws of their society, determined to achieve self-realisation and free self-expression against whatever odds.

This may have been an exaggerated, and at times hysterical, type of romantic self-preoccupation, but the essence of it, the roots from which it grew, did not vanish with the waning of the first wave of the romantic movement, and became the cause of permanent unease, indeed anxiety, in the European consciousness,

as it has remained to this day. It is clear that the notion of a harmonious solution of the problems of mankind, even in principle, and therefore of the very concept of Utopia, is incompatible with the interpretation of the human world as a battle of perpetually new and ceaselessly conflicting wills, individual or collective. Attempts were made to stem this dangerous tide. Hegel, and after him Marx, sought to return to a rational historical scheme. For both there is a march of history – a single ascent of mankind from barbarism to rational organisation. They concede that history is the story of struggles and collisions, but these will ultimately be resolved. They are due to the particular dialectic of self-development of the world-spirit, or of technological progress, which creates division of labour and class war; but these 'contradictions' are the factors which themselves are indispensable to the forward movement that will culminate in a harmonious whole, the ultimate resolution of differences in unity, whether conceived as an infinite progress towards a transcendent goal, as in Hegel, or an attainable rational society, as in Marx. For these thinkers history is a drama in which there are violent contenders. Terrible tribulations occur, collisions, battles, destruction, appalling suffering; but the story has, must have, a happy ending. For Utopian thinkers in this tradition, the happy ending is a timeless serenity, the radiance of a static, conflict-free society after the state has withered away and all constituted authority has vanished – a peaceful anarchy in which men are rational, cooperative, virtuous, happy and free. This is an attempt to have the best of both worlds: to allow for inevitable conflict, but to believe that it is at once unavoidable and a temporary stage along the path to the total self-fulfilment of mankind.

Nevertheless, doubts persist, and have done so since the challenge thrown out by the irrationalists. That is the disturbing heritage of the romantic movement; it has entered the modern consciousness despite all efforts to eliminate or circumnavigate it, or explain it away as a mere symptom of the

pessimism of the bourgeoisie made uneasy by consciousness of, but unable to face, its inescapably approaching doom. Since then the 'perennial philosophy', with its unalterable objective truths founded on the perception of an eternal order behind the chaos of appearances, has been thrown on the defensive in the face of the attacks of relativists, pluralists, irrationalists, pragmatists, subjectivists, and certain types of empiricism; and with its decline, the conception of the perfect society, which derives from this great unitary vision, loses its persuasive power. From this time onward, believers in the possibility of social perfection tend to be accused by their opponents of trying to foist an artificial order on a reluctant humanity, of trying to fit human beings, like bricks, into a preconceived structure, force them into Procrustean beds, and vivisection living men in the pursuit of some fanatically held schema. Hence the protest – and anti-Utopias – of Aldous Huxley, or Orwell, or Zamyatin (in Russia in the early 1920s), who paint a horrifying picture of a frictionless society in which differences between human beings are, as far as possible, eliminated, or at least reduced, and the multi-coloured pattern of the variety of human temperaments, inclinations, ideals – in short, the flow of life – is brutally reduced to uniformity, pressed into a social and political straitjacket which hurts and maims and ends by crushing men in the name of a monistic theory, a dream of a perfect, static order. This is the heart of the protest against the uniformitarian despotism which Tocqueville and J. S. Mill felt to be advancing upon mankind.

Our times have seen the conflict of two irreconcilable views: one is the view of those who believe that there exist eternal values, binding on all men, and that the reason why men have not, as yet, all recognised or realised them is a lack of the capacity, moral, intellectual or material, needed to compass this end. It may be that this knowledge has been withheld from us by the laws of history itself: on one interpretation of these laws it is the class war that has so distorted our relations to each other as to blind men to the truth, and so prevented a rational

organisation of human life. But enough progress has occurred to enable some persons to see the truth; in the fullness of time the universal solution will be clear to men at large; then prehistory will end and true human history will begin. Thus contend the Marxists, and perhaps other socialist and optimistic prophets. This is not accepted by those who declare that men's temperaments, gifts, outlooks, wishes permanently differ one from another, that uniformity kills; that men can live full lives only in societies with an open texture, in which variety is not merely tolerated but is approved and encouraged; that the richest development of human potentialities can occur only in societies in which there is a wide spectrum of opinions – the freedom for what J. S. Mill called 'experiments in living' – in which there is liberty of thought and of expression, views and opinions clash with each other, societies in which friction and even conflict are permitted, albeit with rules to control them and prevent destruction and violence; that subjection to a single ideology, no matter how reasonable and imaginative, robs men of freedom and vitality. It may be this that Goethe meant when, after reading Holbach's *Système de la nature* (one of the most famous works of eighteenth-century French materialism, which looked to a kind of rationalist Utopia), he declared that he could not understand how anyone could accept such a grey, Cimmerian, corpse-like affair, devoid of colour, life, art, humanity. For those who embrace this romantically tinged individualism, what matters is not the common base but the differences, not the one but the many; for them the craving for unity – the regeneration of mankind by recovery of a lost innocence and harmony, the return from a fragmented existence to the all-embracing whole – is an infantile and dangerous delusion: to crush all diversity and even conflict in the interest of uniformity is, for them, to crush life itself.

These doctrines are not compatible with one another. They are ancient antagonists; in their modern guise both dominate mankind today, and both are resisted: industrial organisation versus human rights, bureaucratic rules versus 'doing one's own

thing'; good government versus self-government; security versus freedom. Sometimes a demand turns into its opposite: claims to participatory democracy turn into oppression of minorities, measures to establish social equality crush self-determination and stifle individual genius. Side by side with these collisions of values there persists an age-old dream: there is, there must be – and it can be found – the final solution to all human ills; it can be achieved; by revolution or peaceful means it will surely come; and then all, or the vast majority, of men will be virtuous and happy, wise and good and free; if such a position can be attained, and once attained will last for ever, what sane man could wish to return to the miseries of men's wanderings in the desert? If this is possible, then surely no price is too heavy to pay for it; no amount of oppression, cruelty, repression, coercion will be too high, if this, and this alone, is the price for ultimate salvation of all men? This conviction gives a wide licence to inflict suffering on other men, provided it is done for pure, disinterested motives. But if one believes this doctrine to be an illusion, if only because some ultimate values may be incompatible with one another, and the very notion of an ideal world in which they are reconciled to be a conceptual (and not merely practical) impossibility, then, perhaps, the best that one can do is to try to promote some kind of equilibrium, necessarily unstable, between the different aspirations of differing groups of human beings – at the very least to prevent them from attempting to exterminate each other, and, so far as possible, to prevent them from hurting each other – and to promote the maximum practicable degree of sympathy and understanding, never likely to be complete, between them. But this is not, *prima facie*, a wildly exciting programme: a liberal sermon which recommends machinery designed to prevent people from doing each other too much harm, giving each human group sufficient room to realise its own idiosyncratic, unique, particular ends without too much interference with the ends of others, is not a passionate battle-cry to inspire men to sacrifice and martyrdom and heroic feats. Yet if it were adopted,

Obama
Pragmatism
- below 50%
approval

it might yet prevent mutual destruction, and, in the end, preserve the world. Immanuel Kant, a man very remote from irrationalism, once observed that 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.' And for that reason no perfect solution is, not merely in practice, but in principle, possible in human affairs, and any determined attempt to produce it is likely to lead to suffering, disillusionment and failure.

GIAMBATTISTA VICO AND CULTURAL HISTORY

I

THE STUDY of their own past has long been one of the major preoccupations of men. There have been many motives for this, some of them discussed by Nietzsche in a famous essay: pride, the desire to glorify the achievements of tribe, nation, church, race, class, party; the wish to promote the bonds of solidarity in a given society – 'We are all sons of Cadmus'; faith in the sacred traditions of the tribe – to our ancestors alone has been vouchsafed the revelation of the true ends of life, of good and evil, right and wrong, how one should live, what to live by; and, associated with this, a sense of collective worth, the need to know and teach others to understand the kind of society that we are and have been, the texture of relationships through which our collective genius has expressed itself, and by which alone it can function.

There is the ethical approach: history provides us with authentic examples – and exemplars – of virtue and vice, with vivid illustrations of what to do and what to avoid – a gallery of portraits of heroes and villains, the wise and the foolish, the successful and the failures; here history is seen as being in the first place a school of morals, as, for example, Leibniz declared, or of experimental politics, as Joseph de Maistre (and perhaps Machiavelli) believed.

Then again, there are those who look for a pattern in history, the gradual realisation of a cosmic plan, the work of the Divine Artificer who has created us, and all there is, to serve a universal purpose, hidden from us, perhaps, because we are too weak or