



A CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON ISAIAH BERLIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

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Abstract: Isaiah Berlin famously attacked a view he called historical inevitability. He believed that a causal view of history would entail the adoption of an extreme deterministic position – a kind of determinism which would rule out the possibility of free will, turning moral responsibility into an empty notion. His thesis was also based on the assumption that historians are not just chroniclers of the past but need to engage in moral judgments. Therefore, should determinism hold true of our world, our moral language – and consequently much of our historiographical language – would need to undergo serious revision. In this paper we present a critical analysis of 'Historical Inevitability' (1954), the article in which Berlin argues his case, and we point to an important omission which, in our view, weakens the author's thesis.

Keywords: Isaiah Berlin. Historical inevitability. Free choice. Libertarianism. Historical determinism. History and morality.

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UM COMENTÁRIO CRÍTICO SOBRE A FILOSOFIA DA HISTÓRIA DE ISAIAH BERLIN

Resumo: Isaiah Berlin famosamente atacou o que chamou de inevitabilidade histórica. Ele acreditava que uma visão causal da história implicaria na adoção de uma posição determinística extrema – um tipo de determinismo que excluiria a possibilidade do livre-arbítrio, tornando responsabilidade moral em uma noção vazia. Sua tese também se baseou no pressuposto de que historiadores não são apenas cronistas do passado, mas precisam se empenhar em julgamentos morais. Assim, se a tese do determinismo for verdadeira, nossa linguagem moral – e conseqüentemente grande parte de nossa linguagem historiográfica – precisaria sofrer séria revisão. Neste trabalho apresentamos uma análise crítica de ‘Historical Inevitability’ (1954), artigo no qual Berlin argumenta o seu caso, e apontamos para uma importante omissão que, em nossa visão, enfraquece a tese do autor.

Palavras-chave: Isaiah Berlin. Inevitabilidade histórica. Livre-arbítrio. Libertarianismo. Determinismo histórico. História e moralidade.

INITIAL REMARKS

Counterfactual history is a contemporary controversial trend in historiography which has become popular since the 1990s. It is based on the premise that it makes perfect sense to inquire what would have happened had something in the past been different, or what would have happened had a certain historical figure decided to act differently. Belief in such a premise can be traced back to the work of Isaiah Berlin. Although Berlin’s philosophy of history does not engage in counterfactuals, it enables them.

In a nutshell, Berlin’s philosophy of history is an extension of his libertarianism: freedom is a requirement for any speculation about alternative outcomes in history. History is a description of free human action, in a sense that players are not caused to act by impersonal factors. Being free is defined by the *principle of alternative possibilities*, which says that free agents could have acted differently than they did, had they so desired. So, no historical events are fully necessitated by their antecedents or are to be subsumed under laws of any kind. Hence historical explanations would never conform to the covering-law model. Historians also morally assess the actions of the agents they study. Such moralising is not to be condemned because it plays into the intelligibility of historical explanations.

In the coming pages, we will present and object to some ideas put forward by Berlin in his famous essay ‘Historical Inevitability’ (2002 [1954]). In this, he attacks *deterministic* views of history, and defends that free human agency is always the primary responsible for historical transformation. His arguments assume that determinism cannot be reconciled with free will, and with our intuitions and talk about morality. According to Berlin this is reason enough for us to abandon explanations in which agents are portrayed as unfree, acting according to irresistible external (natural or supernatural) forces. Historical events, he says, are not inevitable.

HISTORICAL INEVITABILITY

Isaiah Berlin advances the view that deterministic theories or approaches to history are committed to some sort of historical inevitability, and consequently with the denial of the possibility of free human agency. He claims that historians morally assess the actions of historical actors, and such a task would only make sense if these actors were free to act in first place. For Berlin, any deterministic explanation of human behaviour, past or present, threatens free-will.

Berlin’s starting point is rather controversial. It says that if historical determinism is true, there can be no free human agency: determinism precludes that things can happen differently. As humans cannot really choose how to act, they become puppets of external, impersonal, irresistible forces, laws of historical development. Moral judgments become meaningless – in order to blame or praise we presuppose an agent to be able to freely choose from a range of possibilities. Berlin does distinguish between *substantive* deterministic theories of history and the *scientific* varieties,² but uses the same argument to criticize both, which is objectionable.³

“Historical Inevitability” is still a common reference in the field of counterfactual history because it highlights another even more obscure notion: the accidental view of history – as opposed to the view that events are causally necessitated or inevitable.⁴ An historical change attributed as the result of an agent’s

2. A good example, even though Berlin does not explicitly point to it, would be the covering laws-model applied to history, as proposed by Carl Hempel in “The Function of General-Laws in History” (1942).

3. Christopher Dawson asks: “how is it possible to condemn in one breath the idealist view that history is the self-manifestation of the absolute spirit in time and the behaviourist view that history is meaningless and that human societies should be studied in the same way we study the termites? No doubt both views are open to objection, but not for the same reasons” (1957, 585).

4. Niall Ferguson claims that not all ‘what if questions’ are relevant, only plausible ones, and attributes the very notion of plausibility to Berlin: “This need for plausibility in the formulation of counterfactual questions was first pointed out by Sir Isaiah Berlin” (1997, 83).

decision or action is portrayed as accidental; the agent could have decided differently irrespective of the previous conditions to his action. Actions are not law governed.

Berlin wants to refute historical inevitability, and in order to so he brings together different and difficult philosophical problems: the role of impersonal forces in history, the problem of free will, history and morality, the ability to make historical predictions, the non-scientific status of history, individualism and holism, among other things. Critics are right to point out that historical inevitability is an overblown idea, as a lot is being packed into it.

KINDS OF HISTORICAL DETERMINISM

(A) THE METAPHYSICAL APPROACH

Teleological theories of history maintain that to explain an event is solely to reveal its purpose, to show that according to a general plan, or cosmological order, things happen as they must. This is highly anti-empirical and speculative. Under this concept, it is just not possible to consider that some events occur without purpose, not fitting into some pattern: this possibility is rejected *a priori*. But such a rejection, Berlin argues, is not warranted. Why should we think of historical events fitting into patterns?

For defendants of this sort of historical determinism, it is the so-called rhythm of history that determinates the occurrence of events, consolidating an idea of inevitability. Expressions such as 'the fall and rise' of an empire are reflections of the idea that history is a book where heroes fight against villains, where characters are to be qualified as winners or losers, where historical players act as they must, guided by forces external to them. To explain is to identify the grand patterns of history.

A history of winners and losers fighting battles that have already been decided for them by some impersonal force or entity is incompatible with free will, which in turn is bounded with moral responsibility. If determinism of this kind were true, individual responsibility would be an illusion. Even if agents were conscious of their 'enslavement', free will could not be restored.

(B) HISTORY AS THE UNDERSTANDING OF A TRANSCENDENT REALITY

A second form of determinism in history defends that an explanation is not based on the identification of goals, but on the understanding of a transcendent reality, something that lies above, or outside, human beings, an inevitable and self-explaining harmony where:

Each element of it is necessitated to be what it is by its relations to the other elements and to the whole... if we do not see actual events and persons as connected with each other by those relations of logical necessity which would make it inconceivable that anything could be other than it is, that is due solely to the failure of our own vision... We are blinded by ignorance, stupidity, passion, and the task of explanation in science or in history is the attempt to show the chaos of appearances as an imperfect reflection of the perfect order of reality. Explanation is the discovery of the 'underlying' pattern (Berlin, 2002, 107-108).

Such an account of historical determinism preaches that players do not seek self-realisation but act according to the workings of an ultimate and timeless structure of reality – one that provides the cause, the explanation and the justification for all that is. It cannot be understood simple by the senses, as these provide only a view of the world of appearances, but by understanding the pattern that governs the universe. To understand the dual relation between reality and appearance explains and justifies.

(C) HISTORY EMULATING THE PHYSICAL SCIENCES

This approach, Berlin maintains, is paradoxical: “scientific method is surely the very negation of metaphysical speculation. But historically the one is closely interwoven with the other, [as both maintain] that all that exists is necessarily an object in material nature, and therefore susceptible to explanation by scientific laws” (Berlin, 2002, 108).

Inspired by the success of physics in classifying, correlating, predicting, it seemed reasonable, at some point, to imagine that also our psychological lives, social relationships and activities should be explained by appeal to general laws. If successful, the enterprise would bring unity to all sciences. Defendants of this approach look for support from the idea that, in principle, there is no reason to object the possibility of laws of historical development, or psychological laws capable of providing true and complete explanation of human actions. Such laws would also, perhaps, establish a symmetry between explanation and prediction.

It is understandable that also historians would want to apply scientific methods to historical studies. But doing so would have moral, political and even religious implications: we describe human behaviour appealing to elements like character, motives, intentions, which can hardly be captured by such methods. To omit or to lessen the importance of these personal factors would be artificial: we use these to evaluate “not merely the degree and kind of influence of this or that motive or character upon what happens, but also its moral or political quality in terms of whatever scale of values one consciously or semi-consciously accepts in one’s thought or action” (Berlin, 2002, 97).

Not only the scientific method would not account for evaluating political and moral qualities, but the very existence of patterns and regularities in history is an object of great controversy. Berlin denies the existence of laws of historical development because any attempt to explain human behaviour as the result of necessitating causes and in accordance with deterministic laws would imply, he thinks, in the denial of freedom and moral responsibility.

CONSEQUENCES OF HISTORICAL INEVITABILITY

Metaphysical and scientific models of historical determinism share the view that to explain is to subsume the subject matter to laws or general formulae. The assumption is that if we knew all the laws, and all the relevant factors, then it would be possible to satisfactorily explain why things happen as they do, precluding that things could have happened otherwise.⁵ An event's description becomes henceforth a mere reflex of historical inevitability.

As to the question 'Why in history things happen as they do?' deterministic positions attribute different meanings for it: "for teleologists [it] means 'In pursuit of what unalterable goal?'; for the non-teleological metaphysical 'realists' it means 'Determined unalterably by what ultimate pattern?'; and for the upholders of the *Comtean* ideals (...) it means 'Resulting from what causes?'" (Berlin, 2002, 109-110).

Berlin's central point, which he repeatedly states, is that teleological, metaphysical or scientific determinism, if proven true, would be incompatible with agents' free will and to our common understanding of what free will entails. Freedom of choice would be just an illusion. The question 'What would have happened otherwise?' would become absurd: all things evolve as they must, and we only come to entertain such thoughts compelled by ignorance of the facts and the laws. Another consequence of determinism, according to Berlin, is that moral assessments, i.e., to say that a certain agent should have acted differently, would also become nonsensical.

Berlin's attack on determinism rests on practical elements. We do morally assess people's behaviour. We also praise agents for, say, their courage, for without their actions, things would have been worse, and so on. And the reason for doing so, according to Berlin, is that people normally believe (or talk as if) individuals are truly free to decide and act. For Berlin, such a belief is supported by another: that when it comes to decision making, humans are not determined by laws. If this premise is false, if human lives are ultimately law-governed, then we only praise and blame to the degree to which we do not know the laws that command human lives. "The more we know (...) the farther the area of human freedom is narrowed.

5. Unless the laws or the initial conditions were different

For the omniscient being, who sees why nothing can be otherwise than as it is, the notions of responsibility or guilt, of right and wrong, are necessarily empty" (Berlin, 2002, 110).

Believers in the deterministic assumption drew different projections for societal evolution. Some have an optimistic outlook, saying that it is just a matter of time until progress and education help us get over many social problems, giving rise to a more mature and peaceful society. Berlin cites Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, Anatole France and Bernard Shaw as good examples of this view. Others adopt the view that progress is to be achieved, but not without struggle and sacrifice. Hegel and Marx think of humans as part of a wider range of law-governed entities, either material (Marx) or spiritual (Hegel) in form. When irresistible and impersonal laws, independent of their nature, reach a certain point of evolution, a new era for mankind is 'due', and wise are those who can see in which direction the world is evolving. Those who realise that human life is governed by larger 'wholes' of forces we are all subjected to, finally get to understand the flux of history. For proponents of substantive philosophies of history, the independent and directed evolution of each of these wholes should be the subject matter of historiography.

According to the deterministic outlook, as broadly defined by Berlin, when historians undertake the task of explaining an agent's action, they must first try to understand the structures and strictures that help shape and determine this individual's life. It is of ultimate importance to grasp the state of development of any of these 'wholes', or structures, or forces, in order to deduce from them why the agent thinks or feels in one way rather than another. Berlin highlights that the identities of these wholes or forces vary among authors, so he compiles a brief list. These can be: "race, colour, Church, nation, class, climate, irrigation, technology, geopolitical situation, civilisation, social structure, the Human Spirit, the Collective Unconscious..." (Berlin, 2002, 114). These are the determining factors for all else that happens in the human sphere. Most individuals remain unaware of the influence of such factors, but the few who understand the illusion of free agency shall become the natural leaders. But if even leaders are no more than puppets of extraneous all-encompassing determining processes, then individual responsibility becomes an empty notion – or so claims Berlin. If the history of the world is governed by impersonal laws, then all explanations must be given in terms of these laws. Consequently, the tendency is to say that laws are responsible for the world's state of affairs, and not individuals. There can be no blame or praise.

One should be reminded that Berlin is not denying that determinism may be a property truthfully ascribed to some systems in the natural world. As he says, no one should get accused or blamed for not being taller, or for having certain hair colour, or for carrying (or lacking) intellectual prowess. These traits originate from

processes oblivious to anyone's will, and perhaps obtain out of natural necessity. Berlin seems to be adopting a dualist position, stating that the realm of the mind operates independently of the realm of physical things, in the sense that our actions are not necessitated by any physical processes. If they were, then we would have to radically change our understanding of responsibility and freedom. Here lies the locus of Berlin's attack on historical inevitability.

Berlin believes that any physicalist explanation of human behaviour would be incompatible with the way we think of ourselves as free agents. We judge other people based on the assumption that they are free in the same way we perceive ourselves to be. Berlin does not deny that necessity may obtain in the physical world, but when it comes to human intentions, the view that everything that 'is' is 'necessary and inevitable' leads to the unacceptable conclusion that moral judgements are absurd. If the physicalist theory is true, one could never justify blame or applaud: "Alexander, Caesar, Attila, Muhammad, Cromwell, Hitler are like floods and earthquakes, sunsets, oceans, mountains; we may admire or fear them, welcome or curse them, but to denounce or extol their acts is as sensible as addressing sermons to a tree" (Berlin, 2002, 115-116). An agent's behaviour ought to be explained solely in terms of the relevant determining factors (race, class, economy...); to condemn their actions would be to ascribe them decision powers – as if they could have acted differently. But historical determinism says this is an illusion, and that history is reducible to natural science or metaphysics.

Berlin's criticism of deterministic outlooks on history take the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. Defendants of historical determinism maintain that it is important for historians to refrain from anachronic or transcultural judgments, not reading the values of the present into past eras. It would be absurd, even for the determinist, to condemn ancient civilisations for not being similar to, say, the American civilisation. In order to do so, it is important to exercise 'powers of sympathy', i.e., to mentally transport ourselves, to the best of our capacities, to cultures and times very distant from ours. When explaining the actions of a historical figure, historians must sympathetically consider the structures and strictures shaping their subject's actions that existed at the time. And the reason for doing, according to Berlin, is the widely held belief that historical agents' actions need to be assessed 'justly'.

Nevertheless, if historical determinism is to be understood as the doctrine of historical inevitability, then every qualifying sentence describing past deeds cannot be just or unjust, but only true or false. And why should historians seek to be just? The mere fact that we praise historical explanations that treat historical figures 'fairly' implies belief in individual responsibility. The degree of individual

responsibility one is willing to concede depends on one's view of history, but it is never nothing:

And yet it is this ... that is virtually denied by those ... steeped in metaphysical or scientific determinism. Such thinkers seem to me committed to the belief that although we may not be able to plot the exact curve of each individual life with the data at our disposal and the laws we claim to have discovered, yet, in principle, if we were omniscient, we could do so, at any rate in the case of others, as precisely as the techniques of scientific prediction will allow" (Berlin, 2002, 119).

THE ROLE OF IMPERSONAL FORCES.

By attacking historical inevitability Berlin intended to defend the view that human choices must be understood as ultimately free from impersonal forces, and that it is legitimate to think that things might happen otherwise: an agent can decide differently, irrespectively of the state of the world, as the human mind is unlikely to be governed by deterministic laws.

But what are vast impersonal forces? In an example taken from literature, Aldous Huxley points out impersonal factors he thinks are threatening to human freedom, such as the mounting pressure of population growth pressing upon existing resources. In the developing world such a pressure results in a decrease of living standards, and an increase of poverty and hunger. As the economic position of poorer countries becomes more precarious, governments must act more decisively to prevent social unrest, sometimes pushing towards totalitarianism. In his preface to *Brave New World*, Huxley says:

Impersonal forces over which we have almost no control seem to be pushing us all in the direction of the Brave New Worldian nightmare; and this impersonal pushing is being consciously accelerated by representatives of commercial and political organizations who have developed a number of new techniques for manipulating, in the interest of some minority, the thoughts and feelings of the masses" (Huxley, 2000 [1958], 8).

An impersonal force can be a demographic or economic factor over which one has no or little control, an aspect which will determine how one is going to live, constraining possibilities for rational action. The presence of such impersonal factors can be overwhelming. One can often feel powerless when facing economic, political or social pressures, and it would be reasonable to assume that one's desires and reasons for acting are influenced by such mechanisms. Berlin is not oblivious to this. What Berlin wishes to maintain, however, is that historians should not overemphasise the importance of such impersonal forces while underrating the

importance of human responsibility. They must strike the right balance between describing action as a rational response to external factors, while not falling into the inevitability trap.

When trying to explain certain episodes of human history, historians may choose between personal and impersonal theories of history. The former is characterised by doctrines where exceptional individuals, guided by free will, lead mankind through important changes. The latter is characterised by individuals whose collective desires – which are not determined by impersonal forces – are responsible for historical developments. It is the historian's job, Berlin maintains, to investigate this complex chain of human desires, motives, fears, intentions, and ask "who wanted what, and when, and where, in what way; how many men avoided or pursued this or that goal (...); and, further, to ask under what circumstances such wants or fears have proved effective, and to what extent, and with what consequences" (Berlin, 2002, 98).

Impersonal theories of history, however, understand that overemphasizing intentions, fears, desires, beliefs, is a mistake; moral responsibility falls under the weight of human powerlessness. The impersonal theorist could advocate there is little one could do to avoid, for example, scarcity of resources in face of population growth, or the effect of prolonged draughts on the availability of food, provided any identifiable pattern is true. According to this view an agent's behaviour is at least partially determined by causes beyond his control – physical factors, the environment, customs, race, nation, class, species, or even some obscure non-empirical entity such as Hegel's *Weltgeist*.⁶

Berlin's take on the role of impersonal forces is objectionable. No argument is presented as to why impersonal forces should never be emphasised. It could be argued, perhaps, that part of the disagreement lies on the notion of force, which can be misleading. In fact, there is no historical force in the sense of an external entity/agent which manipulates a subject's behaviour. Even if sometimes we say so, individuals are not causally manipulated by society, governments, or demographics. One could talk of, say, social pressures which count as a cause for an agent's response, but ultimately, we say that it was the agent's decision to react in a certain way.

If we adopt Lewis theory of causation, for instance, we can say that a complex economic event (an impersonal "force"), such as the economic crisis of 1929, caused the suicide of a few bankers and speculators. Had the crisis not existed, the

6. [World Spirit]. Andy Blunden identifies two different meanings for this term: "in Hegel's earliest works, 'spirit' meant the character of a people or a times, which is formed by their experiences in history, producing and reproducing their lives, enjoying victories and suffering defeats in war. Later on, after about 1804/5, it was a 'World Spirit' which *expressed* or *manifested itself* in the life and times of civilisation as a whole. Rather than an *outcome* of history, it was present *at the outset* only needing to unfold and become conscious of itself" (Blunden, 2007).

suicides would (probably) not have occurred. The crisis as such fits the category of an external factor over which the individual has little power. One can, and we often do, say that the pressure was overwhelming, and at some point, suicide seemed the only way out, so that the agent decided for it.

The overrating of impersonal forces is, according to Berlin, threatening to how we think of freedom and moral responsibility, and it also underestimates individuals' causal powers. The basic idea is to say that despite structural constraints, an agent is never determined to act in a uniquely possible way. It is this leeway for action which makes the agent free. For Berlin, it is always the case that historical figures could have acted otherwise: no action is externally necessitated because its fundamental cause is the will. The determinist, according to Berlin, characterises historical agents as victims, depriving them of personal causal powers, and denying that an act of will can make a meaningful difference. Historical explanation should therefore subscribe to the libertarian view, or risk turning moral categories meaningless.

In a libertarian sense, the suicides of speculators in the wake of the US stock exchange crash of 1929 are free acts of will. For the determinist, it is an example of how overwhelming and irresistible external factors may be. But a good historical explanation of such events can never do away with any of the relevant factors, neither personal nor impersonal. The motivations for the suicides go back to agents' decisions to enter a risky trade, or to speculate. Such a decision is not entirely free, but constrained by organic, psychological factors, like a willingness to ignore risk and a pressing expectation of great reward. A risk averse personality would be a strong deterrent. The deeply negative outcome of the trade comes down to economic impersonal factors like oversupply, and collective, social factors such as herd behaviour and panic selling. Which of these factors is to be emphasised should be determined, we believe, by the nature and scope of the Why? question the historian is trying to answer. If asked why *some* speculators committed suicide, social and economic factors will gain the spotlight. If asked why New York banker J. J. Riordan shot himself in late 1929, one must delve into his personal traits, and the decisions he made prior to his last, which may help explain it. The first question raises the issue of inevitability. Could the crash have been prevented, or was it necessary? Even if one says it seemed inevitable, it hardly poses any threat to moral responsibility or freedom. In contrast, one would struggle to justify the inevitability thesis ascribed to Riordan's suicide.

In fact, inevitability is often used in a charitable way. Marxist historian E. H. Carr says that historians do not think of events as inevitable before they occur: "nothing in history is *inevitable*, except in the formal sense that, for it to have happened otherwise, the antecedent causes would have had to be different. (...) I

am perfectly prepared to do without 'inevitable,' 'unavoidable,' 'inescapable,' and even 'ineluctable'" (Carr, 1964, 96). Personal and impersonal factors are in constant relation one with the other, and complex causal chains are often made of innumerable events, some personal, others impersonal. It would be pointless trying to decide, *a priori*, which theory of history historians should prioritise, as it very much depends on the nature of the *explanandum*. It is not so much that Marxist historians deprive individual historical agents of causal powers, or minimise their moral responsibility. But the set of Why? questions they attempt to answer focus on economic factors and collective behaviour over the long run, so their model of explanation – deterministic in the eyes of Berlin – may not suit the needs of biographers or micro-historians, which are often motivated by different sets of questions and different timeframes.

Furthermore, there is another objection to Berlin. Marx and Hegel are presented in 'Historical Inevitability' as proponents of historical necessity. But the notion of necessity advocated by these thinkers is not one that renders free will an illusion, or one that sustains the view that all events happen as they must, according to irresistible forces. In fact, Hegel never claimed that a philosophical grasp of the necessities of history would allow historians to make predictions about its future course. As William Dray points out in his own *Philosophy of History*: "Hegel does not really attempt to show that each [event] follows inevitably from what preceded it in the main line of historical development" (Dray, 1964, 74). Even his description of Ancient Greek history does not portray an aura of determinism: "the interest of the world's history hung trembling in the balance" (Hegel, 1956, 257) – a quote which suggests that the outcome of the battle was open, or undecided at that point, or not necessitated by the circumstances. Hegel's account of the lives of great leaders, the heroes of history (Alexander, Caesar, or Napoleon) is also one that does not undertake an "impersonal" approach to history. In some moments, it seems to be rather the opposite. Dray identifies in Hegel's account of the role of these great men an aspect of historical *contingency* which he defines as "the fortunate timely availability of both men and conditions", and adds that "[Hegel] envisaged their unpredictable interventions as making a real difference to the course of history" (Dray, 1964, 74).

But Hegel did believe that some historical events are necessitated, or 'postulated by the circumstances':

Caesar rise to power was, according to Hegel, an event postulated by the circumstances: "the Republic could no longer exist in Rome. We see, especially from Cicero's writings, how all public affairs were decided by the private authority of the more eminent citizens – by their power, their wealth; and what tumultuary proceedings marked all political transactions. In the Republic, therefore, there was no longer any security; that could be looked for in a single will (...) Caesar, judged

by the great scope of history, did the Right; since he furnished a mediated element, and that kind of political bond which men's condition required (Hegel, 1956, 312).

In the quote, the only event that is necessitated, or postulated by the circumstances, is the fall of the republic: "conditions being what they were, the republic *would* necessarily fall." But we can also ask: "Would the state be saved? Only if there was a Caesar to do what was required – and *if* he would do it." So, the event of which Caesar has become the *irreplaceable* protagonist – the fall of the Republic – was *necessary*, but it was free human agency that accounts for how it occurred. Dray concludes that "what was required [of Caesar] was, of course, *necessary*; but only in the sense of being necessary *for* the salvation of the state – and for the continued development of history in the development of increasing freedom" (Dray, 1964, 75). Hegel also recognises that there are periods of history when previous gains in terms of societal development are entirely lost.

Hegel's metaphysical speculation – the belief that history has a goal, or a rationality, which is achieved by means of a certain *Will* – is not a thesis we must examine any further. However, if the previous interpretation of Hegel's philosophy of history with regards to historical necessity is correct, then such necessity is not deterministic in the sense feared by Berlin. Hegel is not simply placing historical agents as powerless victims who causally succumb to the pressure of impersonal forces. Hegelianism does not entail the denial of free will, but only that some kinds of events, such as a government being overthrown, may be necessitated by the circumstances. Such a thesis may be false, but it shows that one of Berlin's worries is unwarranted.

THE PRESUPPOSITION OF INCOMPATIBILISM

Berlin's attack on historical inevitability is motivated by his belief in incompatibilism between determinism and freedom. For the incompatibilist, a universe governed by all-encompassing deterministic laws rules out the possibility of free will. Determinism must be false, or our moral categories would become illusory.

We can define determinism along these lines: for the world to be deterministic there must be a set of deterministic laws L which makes the world deterministic. Now, given L and the state of the world at time t_0 , there is a uniquely possible future state of the world at t_1 . Determinism entails that it is physically impossible, given the laws and the previous state of the world, for the state of the world at t_1 or at any future time t_n to be different than it is – the state of the world at t_1 is determined

by the laws and the state of the world at t_0 , or any prior time.⁷ Another possible characterisation for determinism, which includes causation, would say that every event has a cause or causes, and such causes necessitate their effects. So if a causes e , then the occurrence of a necessitates the occurrence of e , where e is the uniquely possible consequent of a . There are other possible definitions of determinism, but for the moment, let's bear in mind these simple characterisations.

The classic incompatibilist position, such as Berlin's, depends on a certain understanding of freedom: an agent has acted freely if it was the case that he could have done otherwise. If determinism is true and the history of the universe is determined by its prior states, according to L , then it is not the case that historical players could have done otherwise, so agents are unfree, and counterfactual speculations are pointless. A common argument in favour of incompatibilism is the 'consequent argument'. McKenna provides a non-technical sketch of it:

No one has power over the facts of the past and the laws of nature.

No one has power over the fact that the facts of the past and the laws of nature entail every fact of the future (i.e., determinism is true).

Therefore, no one has power over the facts of the future (McKenna, 2009).

The consequent argument entails that if determinism is a true theory, an agent cannot alter any fact about the future, even his/her own future. Therefore, freedom and moral responsibility become void of meaning. But we have a strong intuition that we are free, this seems to be presupposed by the way we use our language, by our moral codes, legal system, and many other institutions. Furthermore, there are physical theories that suggest that some systems do not behave deterministically. In the absence of any compelling argument for universal determinism, and considering our desire to keep our moral categories meaningful, the libertarian concludes that there should be no reason for us to abandon our commitment to freedom.

Consider the proposition 'Brutus stabbed Caesar to death'. If determinism is false, says the libertarian, then Brutus was free to act, and is morally responsible for his action precisely because he could have refrained from stabbing Caesar. If determinism is true, however, Brutus could not have refrained from doing it – since the history of the world is uniquely determined by the laws – therefore Brutus was not free to act, and can't be morally blamed for doing what he did. So, moral responsibility is a consequence of the Principle of Alternative Possibilities: an agent is morally responsible for his/her actions only if it is true that s/he could have done otherwise – or so the incompatibilist claims.

7. McKenna offers a similar characterisation. He defines determinism as the metaphysical thesis that *the facts of the past, in conjunction with the laws of nature, entail every truth about the future ...* if determinism is true, then, given the actual past, and holding fixed the laws of nature, only one future is possible at any moment in time (2009).

Libertarians are incompatibilists who say an agent is free *iff* s/he can do otherwise. Still, the libertarian needs to find a way of explaining a player's action without appealing to causes. Libertarians sometimes appeal to two strategies, as we shall now discuss.

The first strategy involves some sort of dualism. Libertarians say that the mental states that explain Brutus' decision to stab Caesar are non-physical. So, even if determinism holds for the physical world, mental states fall outside. Libertarians then claim that human actions are not caused, but are to be explained by the ascription of reasons, where reasons are not causes.

There is something odd about claiming that reasons and causes belong to different logical categories. If Brutus had the desire to stab Caesar, and the belief that this was the best action for him to do, why should we not say that his belief and desire caused him to act the way he did? Mental states are non-physical, but the stabbing of Caesar involves a physical, bodily movement. If universal determinism holds, then Brutus' arm could not have refrained from stabbing Caesar, even if Brutus' mental states are not captured under the same deterministic physical laws that govern whatever his arm does.

As Brian Garrett concisely points out:

...most human actions [...] involve bodily movements. So any deterministic constraints on bodily movement will equally be constraints on human action. Thus, neither the 'mental states are non-physical' nor the reasons are not causes' lines yield any convincing response to the argument for incompatibilism (Garrett, 2006, 113).

Another strategy often used by libertarians is to say that there is good evidence from quantum mechanics that the thesis of universal determinism is false, that some systems behave probabilistically, and that objective chance is real – so there can be free will. Such a strategy is flawed. Elliott Sober provides a witty example as to why indeterminism does not help the libertarian: “suppose (...) your beliefs and desires determine what you will do. I now offer you a brain implant, whereby a tiny roulette wheel is introduced into your deliberation process (...) would the operation make you free? It seems implausible” (Sober, 2001, 304). Instead of being enslaved only by beliefs and desires, now humans are enslaved by “beliefs, desires and a roulette wheel” (*Ibidem*). The roulette wheel does provide objective chance, and the possibility that historical events might evolve along different trajectories, but it does not help the libertarian's case.

A suitable response to Berlin would be to endorse some version of compatibilism, rejecting the consequent argument. This is an alternative Berlin does not even consider in 'Historical Inevitability'. The compatibilist attempts to explain why agents act as they do, and at the same time argues that such actions can be

both free and determined. The starting point for the compatibilist is not to think of freedom as depending on the truth of the 'could have done otherwise' principle. Instead, freedom is often characterised as being functionally capable of acting in accordance to one's own beliefs and desires. The task is not only to account for the possibility of free-will in a deterministic universe, but to portray free will as a theory that requires us to accept that every event – and action – has been caused in some way.

Harry Frankfurt, in “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility” (1969), famously attacked the libertarian characterisation of freedom. He offered an example of a case in which the agent could not have done otherwise, but we still want to say, intuitively, that s/he was morally responsible for the action.

Michael McKenna reconstructs Frankfurt's argument along the following lines:

Jones has resolved to shoot Smith. Black has learned of Jones's plan and wants Jones to shoot Smith. But Black would prefer that Jones shoot Smith on his own. However, concerned that Jones might waver in his resolve to shoot Smith, Black secretly arranges things so that, if Jones should show any sign at all that he will not shoot Smith, Black will be able to manipulate Jones in such a way that Jones will shoot Smith. As things transpire, Jones follows through with his plans and shoots Smith for his own reasons. No one else in any way threatened or coerced Jones, offered Jones a bribe, or even suggested that he shoot Smith. Jones shot Smith under his own steam. Black never intervened (McKenna, 2009).

Jones is not free to do otherwise: he will *inevitably* shoot Jones. However, we say that Jones is morally responsible for the shooting because he *willingly* shoots Smith. If freedom is associated with moral responsibility, we clearly need a definition of freedom different from the one generated by the principle of alternative possibilities, we need a definition of freedom associated to the idea that an agent is free if s/he acts according to his/her *will*. If an agent suffers from a mental illness which affects the way his/her mind works, then the agent is unfree because the actions are not being caused by his/her will in a proper way, but by 'something foreign'.

In the case of historiography, the something foreign could be any of the impersonal factors we have mentioned before. The free-willed agent is in control when his/her actions accord with his/her will. Even if it is true that physically s/he cannot do otherwise, s/he can still be free. In short, not all actions are free, but there can be free action. Moral responsibility is not about being physically capable of doing otherwise, but whether one wants to have the motivation to act in one way or another. Furthermore, when free will issues an action, the desire that issues it is a cause of the act the agent performs – it determines what is to come – and his/

her wanting that action-issuing will is what makes him/her morally responsible for it. The conclusion is that the free-willed agent is morally responsible irrespective of determinism being true. And depending on how the causal relation between the desire and the action is characterised, it could even be said that the free-willed action not only is compatible with, but *requires* determinism to be true. The so-called deterministic approaches to history would considerably strengthen their position by thinking of freedom along these lines. Blame and praise of historical figures, even under a deterministic outlook, would still be meaningful.

HISTORY AND MORALITY

The relation between history and morality is another thesis endorsed by Berlin. In order to argue that historians should not refrain from moralising, Berlin attacks the opposite thesis: the anti-moralist theory. The latter represents how the historical determinist conceives of human history: a place where all is set to occur in a certain way, where players have no free-will, and all there is to do is to identify the right patterns of historical development. However, if 'things are what they are', predetermined by laws and the earlier states of the world, then such a belief can only lead to *deception*. To avoid being deceived we have two options: (1) to accept the existence of impersonal forces guiding mankind towards its end, assuming the role of participants in the *self-realisation* of that force or mystical power; (2) to admit that all events occur in discoverable patterns or system of laws.

Now, (1) seem to be an unpalatable choice for many; (2) focus on the identification of laws of historical development. Both positions represent a version of historical inevitability because historical players are represented as unfree (according to the principle of alternative possibilities). Berlin's conclusion is that the antimoralist's commitment to any of these theses necessitates the acceptance that all *good* and *bad* things are pre-determined or conditioned by general laws. Our attitudes are then regarded as rational according to the degree to which we understand our place in this 'world plan'. As different societies perceive themselves differently, it is not possible for us to blame or praise them for acting as they did, as there can be no static references for morally evaluating people. Every event, action or thought, according to this view, is "caused to occur as it does by the machinery of history itself – by the impersonal forces of class, race, culture, history, Reason ... This organisation of our lives, which we did not create, cannot alter it, ... is ultimately responsible for everything" (Berlin, 2002, 103). Therefore, the sole conclusion to be reached is that humans are not free to choose as they cannot evade natural or supernatural determination, "for if such choices were real, the determined world

structure which alone makes complete explanation [scientific or metaphysical] possible could not exist." (*Ibidem*).

Berlin's attack on anti-moralist history is based on the discussion of the possibility of objective moral judgments as opposed to the fallacious theory that everything is relative. When historians try to avoid moral judgements in the name of historical objectivity, he says, they tend to overemphasise impersonal factors. Berlin asserts that such an attitude induces "humility by forcing us to admit that our own outlook and scales of value are neither permanent nor universally accepted (...) such a line of approach throws doubt upon all attempts to establish a definitive boundary between the individual's free choice and his natural ... necessitation." (Berlin, 2002, 126)

One possible response to the view that determinism is incompatible with free will is to stop making moral judgements. Scepticism about moral assessments come from two different perceptions, those who think we know too much (deterministic position) and those who think we know too little (relativistic position), and are in fact conditioned by our own historical environment. With this distinction in mind Berlin suggests that both perceptions do not offer good advice for historians.

...some feel sure that the natural sciences will in the end account for everything, explain our behaviour in terms of natural causes. Others (...) explain it by speaking of invisible powers and dominions, nations, races, cultures. Others speak in terms of some teleological procession, or hierarchy, whereby all individuals, countries, institutions, cultures, ages, fulfil their several parts in some cosmic drama. To know all is to understand all; it is to know why things are and must be as they are; therefore the more we know the more absurd we must think those who suppose that things could have been otherwise, and so fall into the irrational temptation to praise or blame. *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner* is transformed into a mere truism. (Berlin, 2002, 127)

By representing ourselves as victims of such laws and forces it becomes easy to explain away our failures, what might strengthen the idea that all things happen *inevitably*; all choices are caused by elements or forces we do not control. To understand reality equals seeing that nothing could be different than it is.⁸ It follows that the better we understand these laws or trends the more forgiving we can be to others and to our own acts. We escape moral dilemmas by portraying them as unreal.

Berlin accepts that deterministic theories do a good job at explaining physical phenomena, as some systems do appear to behave deterministically. Think of billiard balls moving on a pool table; an adequate explanation of their movement

8. Berlin exemplifies this view by citing Spinoza, Godwin, Tolstoy, Comte, mystics and rationalists, theologians and scientific materialists, metaphysicians and dogmatic empiricists, American sociologists, Russian Marxists and German historicists.

will invariably appeal to *Newtonian* laws of motion. But such an approach would not be applicable to history, he says, because human players are presumably free from whatever laws govern the physical world.

This position implies that there are two types of events:

(1) natural events which are not the result of free action, i.e., no agent contributed to it and therefore it is not up to any agent whether the event occurs or not;

(2) actions that are the result of free human agency.

Berlin believes that type-1 events do not causally determine type-2 events, so our response to what happens in the world remains free – a position typically adopted by incompatibilists. As our actions are the result of indeterminism, we can have moral responsibility. Berlin now turns to how far historical understanding is possible, and what this tells us in terms of being in a position of ‘knowing all’. The argument follows these lines:

a. Even dispassionate historians find it difficult to sympathetically place themselves in the historical agent’s shoes, because it is impossible to know all factors associated with the agent’s behaviour;

b. Consequently, historian’s evaluations (also moral evaluations) are founded on incomplete or insufficient data;

c. Therefore, historian’s ignorance outweighs knowledge, and all we can hope for is to shed a little light on some ‘corner’ of the past.

As Berlin proceeds, he says that the previous argument is the origin of two distinct theses about human morality:

(T1) The thesis of human ineffectiveness

Men are capable of deliberating and taking decisions, but such events do not impact greatly on the actual course of events. As humans are powerless, motives should not be part of the historian’s worries, as his/her real business “is to discover and describe what occurred, and how and why, if he allows his moral opinions of men’s characters and motives – those least effective of all historical factors – to colour his interpretations, he thereby exaggerates their importance...” (Berlin, 2002, 136).

(T2) The thesis of human ignorance

This thesis relies on the assumption that our knowledge of the world is insufficient to justify the ascription of responsibilities. Because we are not omniscient beings we should not presumptuously try to do it. Historians should adopt a humbler position by accepting their ignorance and inability to ascribe moral responsibility.

Berlin concludes that it is possible that T1 and T2 to be both, as they seem to originate from the same “pessimistic conviction of human weakness, blindness and ineffectiveness both in thought and in action” (Berlin, 2002, 136). As these doctrines were proposed with the same objective – to make individual responsibility ‘melt away’ – the consequence of their acceptance is that individuals must not be blamed or praised because they cannot help but act as they do, or because we know too little to judge them.

But because neither T1 nor T2 accord with our ordinary views on morality, it is important to find a way to refute them, which Berlin undertakes to do with the two following arguments. We will try to reconstruct these from his eloquent but somewhat repetitive prose.

(a) The anti-moralist position is absurd

Ascribing individual responsibility is not possible given our ineffectiveness and/or ignorance; which means we should not bring charges of moralism against historians who do try to praise or blame historical figures. But all moral standards are pronounced relative, so it is not rationally justifiable to attack or defend the position of condemning moralism in history. We face a *reductio ad absurdum* of the entire position, as we cannot condemn an attitude towards the biased writing of history, as nothing can be condemned or defended.

(b) anti-moralism is not compatible with how we talk about the world

There is nothing questionable when we say that Pasteur was a benefactor, and Hitler’s actions were evil. In saying such things, we are only making public our approval and disapproval of people’s actions. With our disapproval of Hitler’s actions, we make clear that we are not favourably disposed towards acting as he did, and that our moral and intellectual ideals differ greatly from our perception of his ideals. It is a common assumption we make that Hitler could and should have acted differently than he did. But if universal determinism holds, then we only think of people as being capable of acting differently because of our failure to realise that they could not have acted differently. Or it could be that our ignorance prevents us in telling how different they could have acted.

However, it seems impossible to eliminate from our ordinary speech all value judgements, as it would cause enormous distortions to how we communicate in general. To blame historians for adopting a biased position would be equally absurd. The call for historians to suppress moral insights seems to originate from a confusion of the methods of the human studies with those of the natural sciences. And because there is no good reason to adopt the anti-moralist approach, and because by adopting it we cause serious trouble to our ordinary language, historians

should not refrain from making moral judgments – although they should, of course, refrain from committing excesses.

There are two possible interpretations of Berlin's position regarding moralising history. We could say that Berlin is only attacking the anti-moralist theory, by saying that there is no reason historians should refrain from value-judgements; and that the anti-moralist position is self-refuting. If historians wish to express admiration for Napoleon, they should not be condemned for doing it. Analogously, if a historian wishes to remain factually objective, pointing to causes without ever moralising, that would also be acceptable. Moral assessment is here seen as facultative, not necessary for the provision of adequate causal explanations.

However, Berlin's position about morality appears more complex, as it overlaps with his rejection of determinism. Another way of interpreting him would be to say that the anti-moralist approach to history is only a thing for the historical determinist. When the libertarian historically explains by appealing to reasons, motives, intentions (which are not *causes* for the libertarian) s/he necessarily assesses the political and moral qualities of all players involved. Berlin's insistence on the necessity of free will is clearly motivated by his assessment that the historian *needs* to morally qualify his/her object of study. Berlin believes that historians' descriptions of an agent's action reveal whether they praise or blame the agent for acting as s/he did, and that the explanation of the action itself is made intelligible by such value judgements. This is because the success of a sympathetic exercise in placing oneself in the shoes of a historical player will depend on the acquisition of some understanding of this player's moral categories. Such an understanding is not pursued by the anti-moralist. This second interpretation implies that the writing of history must be moral in some sense; one could not produce *proper* historiography, such as Hitler's biography, without ever moralising.⁹

FINAL REMARK

In the famous paper we have fleetingly examined, Berlin attacked approaches to history in which the existence of free will was somehow questioned, as if historical players succumbed, at times or always, to external forces beyond their control. He vehemently denied any speculation that history has a course, that mankind evolves towards progress, or that historians can discover historical patterns and identify laws of historical development. Although he was a libertarian, Berlin did not quite say that determinism, even when applied to the human sphere, is *necessarily* false. But he argued, as we have seen, that if determinism were indeed

9. It should be noted that in Historical Inevitability Berlin's thesis on the possibility of objective moral judgements is presupposed, but not developed.

the case, then much of what we say about morality, responsibility and freedom would be nonsensical. As moral assessments play an important role in all rational activity, the truth of determinism would throw things in disarray, forcing us to radically revise language and concepts regarding our experience of life, past and present. The writing of 'Historical Inevitability' was motivated by a noble desire. As there seems to be no good reason to endorse determinism, and as we know that its falsity would preserve the dignity of free choice, it is preferable, believes Berlin, to ascribe historical players' meaningful freedom. But the reasons he provides to support the view that determinism threatens the way we conceive of our moral categories is weakened by his omission of the case of compatibilism.

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