

Changing Reality by Changing Ideas

False fatalism – A change of mind

FALSE FATALISM

1.1 The human mind is perverse in not recognising its own achievement. It behaves as if the world that it has created were some sort of mysterious natural phenomenon that it has inherited, as a second place in which to live, alongside the natural world that it certainly did not create. The human mind faces the human world as if it were a second natural world.

1.2 And yet every feature of the human world from the greatest to the smallest – from the greatest empire or the greatest work of engineering to the most modest human family or the smallest work of art – comes from nowhere but from within the infinitely and ceaselessly creative human mind. We are a species that found within itself, as if by a miracle, world-creating and world-transforming power and self-creating and self-transforming power.

1.3 Our perverse self-denying may have a cause, or at least an incentive, in our sense of the ambiguity of what we have achieved. It is very good and very bad. We are a species that also found within itself, by a cruel irony, a relentless capacity for making things worse. History and our everyday experience lead us to think that the human world is the product of two overwhelming and conflicting human powers, a power of self-perfecting and a power of self-harming.

1.4 Our perverse naturalising of the human world may then be seen as a way of detaching ourselves from responsibility for what we have

achieved, the best and the worst. A false fatalism is a convenient way of transferring responsibility to something beyond our control, even if that something is nothing but us. The fact that so much of what we have achieved, good and bad, is the work of human societies supports this attitude, since collective human behaviour is not attributable to any particular human beings.

1.5 False fatalism is defeatism. It has deep negative effects on the whole of human self-consciousness. It is *disempowering*. It suggests that we are not able to cause the forces of self-perfecting to overcome the forces of self-harming. It may even suggest that our conscious efforts are as likely to make things worse as to make them better. It is *discouraging*, justifying our surrender in the face of the actual state of the human world, even though we know perfectly well that the actual state was not, and is not, the only possible state of the human world. It is *self-deceiving*, claiming that there is something called human nature, and human nature always has been as it is, and is not likely to be any different in the future. It is *stupefying*, undervaluing and undermining the great capacities of the human mind to imagine and to realise the possible, constantly defying the brutal reality of the actual.

1.6 The highest irony is that, taking account of evolutionary biology, it is possible to believe, on the contrary, that the human species is at an early stage of its self-evolving. We have taken over our own evolving. We know no limit to that process. The creative achievements of the human mind, especially over recent centuries, have included the amazing development of human society into a massive engine of collective energy and the amazing development of the power of the human mind over the natural world through the wonders of natural science and engineering. Why should we suppose that the human mind could not continue to produce amazing new creative achievements in the human world and in the humanness of the human species?

1.7 Why should we fail to see that there are unused potentialities of the massively complex and powerful human brain? Why should we suppose that the human mind has exhausted its potentiality in creating the actual state of the human world? Why should we suppose that the human species has exhausted its inherent potentialities of self-evolving and self-perfecting?

1.8 Another miracle is that, despite everything, we can always overcome false human fatalism. It may be that, in the human world of the twenty-first

century, we have one last opportunity to do so. The immense accumulation of social power over all human functions and all human behaviour, and the rapidly increasing domination of human-made machines over the autonomous activity of the human mind, are setting a very great challenge to the human mind, perhaps an ultimate challenge. It is becoming ever more difficult for the human mind to rise above itself, individually and collectively, and to speak courageously about the world that it has made and the world that it can want to make in the future. Soon we may simply be unable to do so.

A CHANGE OF MIND

1.9 This book offers a system of ideas designed to allow us take stock of the human condition in the twenty-first century, and to rise above it, and to make it better. It is focused on the most remarkable achievement of the human species – human *society*, as a system of human *self-ordering* under *law* – the main arena of the drama of human history and of the human future.

1.10 False fatalism has suggested that human society is a more or less random by-product of the dramatic struggles of human history. Human society is certainly a product of the struggles of human history. But it is entirely a product of human minds. For thousands of years, we have thought about the nature and purpose and potentiality of human collective existence. Actual states of the human world, throughout history, have reflected past and actual states of that thinking. Why should we suppose that we have reached the end of self-creative thinking?

1.11 We make the destiny that makes us. We should praise *ourselves* and blame *ourselves* for what we are and what we become. In the twenty-first century, our self-made destiny confronts us with an unprecedented challenge. It is a universal social problem. It is also a universal human problem. How are all human beings to survive and flourish together in a world which has now brought all human beings together into one single struggle for human survival and human flourishing? How can all human beings live a good life together?

1.12 The first step on this daunting journey is a radical change in our minds, a transformation of general human self-consciousness, a rejection of the false fatalism that feeds despair and impotence, a revival of human self-understanding and self-confidence. As at so many previous great

turning points in human history, we need new ideas for making a new human reality in a new world-historical situation.

1.13 We who are paradoxical optimists oppose false fatalism and negate it dialectically. We look at the human world as it was. We see the human world as it is. We choose to make a human world that is better.

OTHER VOICES

- 1.A ‘The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves. . . .’
Wm. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, I. 2 (Cassius speaking).
- 1.B ‘Madmen who ceaselessly complain of Nature, learn that all your misfortunes arise from yourselves!’
J-J. Rousseau, *The Confessions* (1769/1782), bk. VIII
(tr., J.M. Cohen; Penguin Classics; 1953), 362.
- 1.C ‘It is not unknown to me how many men have had, and still have, the opinion that the affairs of the world are in such wise governed by fortune and by God that men with their wisdom cannot direct them and that no one can even help them; and because of this they would have us believe that it is not necessary to labour much in affairs, but to let chance govern them. This opinion has been more credited in our times because of the great changes in affairs which have been seen, and may still be seen, every day, beyond all human conjecture. Sometimes pondering over this, I am in some degree inclined to their opinion. Nevertheless, not to extinguish our free will, I hold it to be true that Fortune is the arbiter of one-half of our actions, but that she still leaves us to direct the other half, or perhaps a little less.’
N. Machiavelli, *The Prince* (1513/32), ch. XXV (tr. & ed., W.K. Marriott; 1908), 197.
- 1.D ‘Men will always be mad, and those who think they can cure them are the maddest of all.’
Voltaire, to Louise Dorothea of Meiningen, Duchess of Saxe-Gotha (c. 30 January 1762).
Voltaire’s Correspondence (ed., Th. Besterman; 1959), vol. XLVIII (letter 9504), 61.
- 1.E ‘For things will never be perfect, until human beings are perfect – which I don’t expect them to be for quite a number of years.’
Th. More, *Utopia* (1516), bk. I (tr., P. Turner; Penguin Classics; 1965), 65.
- 1.F ‘The great stream of time and earthly things will sweep on just the same in spite of us. It bears with it now all the errors and follies of the past, the wreckage of all the philosophies, the fragments of all the civilizations, the wisdom of all the abandoned ethical systems, the debris of all institutions, and the penalties of all the mistakes. It is only in imagination that we

stand by and look at and criticize it and plan to change it . . . That is why it is the greatest folly of which a man can be capable, to sit down with a slate and pencil to plan out a new social world.'

W.G. Sumner, 'The absurd effort to make the world over',
The Forum (1894);
republished in *War and Other Essays* (1913).

1.G 'But against the palpably sophistical proofs of Leibniz that this is the best of all possible worlds, we may even oppose seriously and honestly the proof that it is the *worst* of all possible worlds. For possible means not what we may picture in the imagination, but what can actually exist and last. Now this [human] world is arranged as it has to be if it were to be capable of continuing with great difficulty to exist; if it were a little worse, it would be no longer capable of existing. Consequently, since a worse world could not continue to exist, it is absolutely impossible; and so this world itself is the worst of all possible worlds.'

A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*
(1819/1844), vol. II, ch. xlvi
(tr., E.F.J. Payne; 1958/1966), 583.

1.H 'For if men judge that learning should be referred to action, they judge well; but in this they fall into the error described in the ancient fable, in which the other parts of the body did suppose the stomach had been idle, because it neither performed the office of motion, as the limbs do, nor of sense, as the head does; but yet, notwithstanding, it is the stomach that digests and distributes to all the rest; so if any man think philosophy and universality to be idle studies, he does not consider that all professions are from thence served and supplied.' '. . . they are ill discoverers that think there is no land, when they can see nothing but sea.'

F. Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (1605–33) 2nd bk.
(Everyman's Library; 1915), 63, 94.

1.I 'The great changes which appear from time to time in the constitution of society can be the effect neither of chance nor of force alone. The cause which produces them must be powerful, and must be found in man himself. If the laws of human association are no longer the same as in antiquity, it is because there has been a change in man. There is, in fact, a part of our being which is modified from age to age; this is our intelligence. It is always in movement; almost always progressing; and on this account, our institutions and our laws are subject to change. Man has not, in our day, the way of thinking that he had twenty-five centuries ago; and this is why he is no longer governed as he was governed then.'

N. Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City. A Study on the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome* (1864) (tr., not named; 1956/c.1980), 4.

1.J ‘I would only remark this, that what has been said reveals that the study of the history of Philosophy is the study of Philosophy itself . . . What follows secondly from what we have said, is that every philosophy has been and still is necessary. Thus none have passed away, but all are affirmatively contained as elements in a whole . . . The principles are retained, the most recent philosophy being the result of all preceding, and hence no philosophy has ever been refuted. What has been refuted is not the principle of this philosophy, but merely the fact that this principle should be considered final and absolute in character . . . the [internal] history of Philosophy has not to do with what is gone, but with the living present.’

G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on History of Philosophy* (1805–30; published 1840), Intro.

(tr., E.S. Haldane; 1892/1995), 37, 39.

In *The Philosophy of History* (ed., K. Hegel; tr., J. Sibree; 1956; Intro., at page 69) Hegel said that philosophy is ‘the thinking of thinking’.

1.K ‘Human culture taken as a whole may be described as man’s progressive self-liberation. Language, art, religion, science, are various phases in this process. In all of them man discovers and proves a new power – the power to build up a world of his own, an “ideal” world. Philosophy cannot give up its search for a fundamental unity in this ideal world.’

E. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man. An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (1944), 228.

1.L ‘A good cultivated mind contains, so to speak, all the minds of preceding centuries; it is the same mind that has been cultivating itself through all this time.’

B. de Fontenelle, *Digression sur les Anciens et les Modernes* (1688) (ed., R. Shackleton; 1955), 171–72; present author’s translation).

Fontenelle is also credited with the delightful Leibniz-style saying: ‘Everything is possible, and everybody is right’, quoted in G.W. Leibniz, *The Monadology* (1714) (ed., R. Latta; 1898), 309, fn. 45.

1.M ‘There is a tide in the affairs of men, / Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; / . . . On such a full sea are we now afloat, / And we must take the current when it serves / Or lose our ventures.’

W. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* (1599), IV.3 (Brutus speaking).

1.N ‘How greedily this wave approaches, as if it were after something! But already another wave is approaching, still more greedily and savagely than the first . . . and its soul, too, seems to be full of secrets and the lust to dig up treasures. Thus live waves – thus live we who will.’

F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882) §310 (*tr.*, W. Kaufmann; 1974), 247.

1.O ‘Great spirits now on earth are sojourning; . . . / These, these will give the world another heart / And other pulses. Hear ye not the hum / Of mighty workings in the human mart? / Listen awhile, ye nations, and be dumb.’

J. Keats, *Sonnet* (1817).

1.P ‘*Hay tres cosas que quisiera decirte. / pero la segunda contradice la primera / y la tercera es un malentendido. / Preferible el silencio.*’ (‘There are three things I would like to tell you. But the second contradicts the first and the third is a misunderstanding. Silence is better.’)

C. Peri Rossi, *A los amigos que me recomiendan viajes*
(‘To the friends who say I should travel’) (present author’s translation).

1.Q ‘We are on a *mission*. Our vocation is the education of the earth.’

F. von Hardenberg (1772–1801); under the pen-name Novalis,
in *Novalis. Philosophical Writings* (*ed. & tr.*, M.M. Stoljar; 1997), 28.

1.R ‘The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world; and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock of notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically. This, and this alone, is the scope of the following essay. And the culture we recommend is, above all, an inward operation.’

M. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1867–69), preface to the 1869
publication
(*ed.*, S. Collini; 1993), 190.