

ISAIAH BERLIN LECTURE

Reason and Identity

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I AM MOST GRATEFUL to the British Academy for inviting me to deliver this year's Isaiah Berlin Lecture. It is a great honour but also rather intimidating, for I am acutely aware that what I say is unlikely to measure up to the high standards set by my seven distinguished predecessors.

I shall begin with a few words about the style and content of Sir Isaiah Berlin's thought. A philosopher is most at ease with himself and also most effective when he chooses a genre of writing that is best suited to his manner of thinking, and Berlin knew that better than most. Although he could have done so, he did not write what in the academic world is called a big book, a *magnum opus*, or even systematise his ideas into a carefully constructed philosophical system. He was basically an essayist who enjoyed the freedom offered by that genre to explore his chosen subjects from different angles without the constraint to ensure that his views on different subjects or even on the same subject were consistent and formed part of a coherent and integrated body of thought. This does not in any way detract from his stature as a truly creative and original thinker. Rather it reflects the admirable and complementary qualities of courage and humility, the former because it shows his refusal to remain imprisoned within what he had said earlier out of regard for the problematic virtue of consistency, and humility because it involves admitting implicitly or explicitly that he had not got things quite right the last time he wrote about the subject. Berlin offered profound insights into the inescapable dilemmas and tragic ambiguities of human existence, and

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pointed out with characteristic fluency the confusions and mistakes of those who ignored these. His powerful critique of moral monism and hubristic rationalism, his defence of value pluralism, analysis of liberty and exploration of the human search for individual and especially collective identity represent a remarkable intellectual achievement, and rightly make him one of the most influential political philosophers and historians of ideas of the twentieth century.

In this lecture I intend to explore the complex relation between the closely connected ideas of reason and identity. I do so partly because the subject exercised Berlin himself and partly because it goes to the heart of moral and political life and merits greater attention than it has received so far. Reason and identity are both constitutive features of human life in the sense that human beings cannot be defined and understood without reference to either. Reason is not a single and unitary faculty but a cluster of closely related capacities such as the ability to think, form concepts and generalisations, make choices, reflect critically upon oneself and the world, give and be guided by reasons for one's beliefs and actions, and to articulate visions of the best forms of individual and collective life. Human beings display these capacities, albeit in different forms and degrees, and are unique in possessing most of them. They are also members of and shaped by their cultural, religious and political communities and acquire particular social identities. They are able to reflect critically on their inherited identities, decide what kinds of persons they wish to be, and to give themselves a self-chosen personal identity.

Since reason and identity are both central to human life, moral and political philosophy needs to establish a coherent relation between them. This has not proved easy because, among other things, reason tends to stress impersonality and uniformity whereas identity does the opposite. Some writers whom I shall call rationalists privilege reason and so understand its nature and role in human life that identity disappears from the view or plays only a shadowy and marginal role. Others privilege identity and so define its nature and power that for all practical purposes it is placed beyond the reach of reason. In this lecture I criticise these views, and end by suggesting that we need to integrate reason and identity and develop the mutually complementary identity-sensitive view of moral reason and a rationally accountable or critical view of identity.

Rationalism

Although rationalism takes different forms and admits of degrees, a particular version of it has exercised a hegemonic influence and set the standards for others. Even those who are critical of some aspects of it are impressed by its philosophical consistency and rigour and find its appeal difficult to resist. This dominant version, on which I shall concentrate, goes back to Plato and includes such thinkers as the Stoics, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz, Kant, Hegel, Sidgwick and early Rawls.

According to this version of rationalism, reason is the *differentia specifica* of human beings,¹ and is the basis of their ontologically privileged status and dignity. The rational life, the life based on and governed by reason, is alone fully or truly human and worthy of human beings. Reason is believed to be autonomous and self-contained, and capable of transcending or rising above the agent's feelings, emotions, local situations and circumstances; indeed it is at its best or purest when it does so. It is guided by methodically collected and carefully scrutinised facts, principles of consistency, rules of valid inference, and a careful assessment of arguments for and against different views. Every step it takes in its journey to its conclusions is guided by and justified in terms of reasons based on these. Reasons are general in the sense that they are not tied to particular contexts and can be instantiated in a variety of situations. They are also impersonal or objective in the sense that they are detachable from the particularities of the reasoning agents, and their validity is independent of the latter's preferences and attitudes.

In the rationalist view, rational discussion is an impersonal process in which the weight of evidence and argument is all that matters to the participants. They rise above their particularities, consider each other's arguments solely on their merit, and seek to reach a common conclusion. They should in principle have no difficulty resolving their differences. If the latter persist, that is only or mainly because their arguments are not compelling and powerful enough. They should aim at producing increasingly better arguments until they feel sure that no rational person can fail to be convinced by them. If some still remain unconvinced, they must be wilfully perverse, dim-witted, obtuse, in the grip of irrational prejudices and dogmas. They can rightly be ignored and, if necessary, coerced in the interest of social stability.

¹ Rationalism also informs the work of Jürgen Habermas and Brian Barry.

For the rationalist, moral and political life should be based on principles whose validity no rational person can deny. They should be supported not by an appeal to local traditions or to a human or divine authority but by offering compelling reasons. Reason arrives at such principles by reflecting on the basic and universally common facts about human beings and the world. It tells us what ways of organising individual and collective lives are rational or the best, and uses them to judge the prevailing forms of individual and social life. The rationalist takes man or the humankind as the basic unit of moral and political reflection, and aims to develop a universal and context-free moral theory. While moral principles are universal in their scope and validity, all that is of local concern, such as the practices governing birth, marriage and disposal of the dead, forms of greetings and traffic rules, is a matter of contingent, variable and ultimately arbitrary customs and conventions. They spring up more or less unplanned, and their claim to acceptance largely rests on the fact that they are familiar and woven into the prevailing way of life. The distinction between morality and custom, the former governed by universal reason and the latter by local significance, is rationalism's way of coping with human diversity.

The rationalist morality is articulated in terms of universal principles based on general and impersonal reasons. One should treat all human beings equally because there are compelling reasons to justify the belief that they all have equal worth. As moral beings they should make choices and undertake actions that maximise human happiness, treat others as ends-in-themselves, realise the *telos* of human nature, further the cause of history, whose guiding maxims pass the universalisability test, or whatever else is taken to be a universally valid standard of morality. One should obey the civil authority of one's country and respect its laws because this is required by the principle of consent, fair play, contractual obligation, gratitude for the benefits received, the fullest realisation of human nature, or some such general principles. In short reason (or philosophy) provides the foundational principles of moral and political life, and gives it its legitimacy and structure.

The rationalist does not deny the role of emotions and attachments in human life, but thinks that they are arbitrary, subjective and likely to mislead reason. He therefore seeks to subject them to the disciplinary regime of reason. They do not qualify as reasons for action in their own right, and do so only when justified on general and impersonal grounds. It is not enough to say that one cares for one's parents and children and prefers them over others because one loves them, is committed to them, is tied to

them by mutual expectations, and that one's life is inextricably bound up with theirs. One needs to show that it is rational to be committed to them in this way, and that such partiality as it entails is justified on general and impersonal grounds. This is done by arguing, for example, that the family is a morally and socially valuable institution and requires partiality as its necessary basis, that it represents the most effective and reliable way to divide up the collective task of promoting human well-being, or along some such lines.

In the rationalist view right and wrong are objective judgements based on universally valid moral principles. An action is either right or wrong. It cannot be both, and its rightness or wrongness does not admit of degrees. Moral principles have to be applied to concrete situations, and these make a difference in the sense that what is right in one situation might not be so in another. However what is right or wrong in one situation is equally so in other similar situations. To suggest otherwise is to be inconsistent. While the situation or circumstances surrounding an action make a moral difference, the identity of the moral agent does not. For the rationalist it makes no moral or rational sense to say that an action is right *for me* but not for you, him, or anyone else. Moral judgements rest on general and impersonal reasons. To introduce reasons of a personal nature is to subjectivise morality, in the rationalist view a contradiction in terms.²

While rationalism has much to be said for it, as will become clear later and which explains its continuing appeal, it rests on a narrow and impoverished view of human life in general and of moral and political life in particular. It reduces human beings to or treats them as homogeneous moral agents, uniform instantiations of human nature or species, and ignores the important role of personal and social identity in human life and the deep legitimate differences that are associated with it.

As reflective and meaning-creating beings living under different circumstances, facing different problems and being heirs to different traditions and histories, human beings understand and structure their lives in different ways. Since the latter are human creations and deal with the universally common problems of human existence, no two ways of thought and life or cultures are totally distinct or mutually unintelligible. However given their different histories, circumstances, forms of rational reflection and varieties of human imagination, no two ways of thought and life are

² See, for example, H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (7th edn.) (London, 1907), p. 2.

wholly alike or identical either. They give universally shared human capacities and emotions different orientations and cultivate some wholly new ones of their own. And while sharing certain common moral values without which no stable human life is possible, they define their scope, meaning, content and priorities differently and add to these some new ones of their own. Thanks to this, different ways of life represent and are structured in terms of different visions of the good life, and acquire different collective identities. Their members grow up being shaped though not determined by these, and understand the world and organise their affairs in terms of different standards of morality and rationality.

Since human beings are culturally embedded, no vision of the good life can be based on the universally shared features of human nature and the world alone. Culture plays an important part in its definition and articulation, and its role cannot be ignored. The rationalist also makes another related mistake. He naively assumes that different human capacities and forms of excellence can be harmoniously combined into some vision of the best or fully human society. Human capacities conflict both intrinsically and because of the limitations of the human condition and the constraints of social life, and some can be developed only at the expense of others. This is equally true of moral values, virtues and forms of excellence. A way of life can realise some of these only by forgoing or marginalising others. While one way of life can therefore be better than another in some particular respect, they cannot be judged as wholes and graded on some universal scale.

Take something as central as self-respect which, since Kant and even earlier, has come to be seen as an intrinsic good of great importance. Buddhist societies take a different view of it, largely because of their different and tightly complex view of the human self. In their view the self has two interrelated dimensions: a lightly drawn and jealously guarded boundary between oneself and others, and maintaining the internal unity of the self by imposing on it a rigid disciplinary regime. The self so defined is seen as the source of self-enclosure, exclusivity, egoism, selfishness, social injustices, and violence to oneself and others. The supreme moral concern for the Buddhist is to see through the illusory nature of the self and to open it up to others, to let them flow into oneself, as a step towards developing good will (*maitri*) and *karuna* (compassion) towards all human beings.

Since the self in the Buddhist view needs to be weakened and eventually dissolved, self-respect in its conventional sense is not seen as a value, let alone an important one. It is a form of self-assertion, a way of nur-

turing and strengthening the self, and stands in the way of deep humility and identification with others. This does not mean that one treats oneself or allows others to treat one with contempt. Self-contempt is the obverse of self-respect and just as flawed. The Buddhist concern is to rise above both, and that involves a very different attitude to oneself and others. One does not take pride in one's material or even moral and spiritual achievements, make them the basis of one's self-esteem, or feel troubled when they are not recognised by others. One is not unduly sensitive to how one is treated by others either, nor takes offence when their treatment fails to conform to one's expectations. When insulted or slighted by others, one does not become aggressive. Rather one feels concerned that they should have degraded themselves in this way and feels protective about them in a non-patronising manner.

A society based on the Buddhist view of the self, and other related ideas such as inner contentment, avoidance of all forms of crude and subtle aggression, non-violence in thought, feeling, speech and action, and being at peace with oneself, one's fellow men and nature, structures and reasons about its affairs very differently from its modern liberal counterpart. It values different things and assigns different degrees of importance to those it shares with the latter. This is not to say that it is overall better or worse than liberal society or that it cannot be criticised in internal and external terms, but rather that it organises its social and moral relations and reasons about them in a different way, has its unique strong and weak points, and cannot be summarily dismissed for its failure to conform to the liberal or some other abstract vision of a truly human society.

Let us take a concrete and perhaps more telling example.³ In the early 1960s, President Kennedy sent a delegation to Kenya to ascertain what assistance his country could give it to increase its material prosperity. The delegation found that Kenyan fishermen left their homes at the crack of dawn and returned late in the evening with just about enough haul of fish to keep them alive. It advised the US Government to send them highly efficient motorised fishing boats to ease their travail and increase their daily haul substantially so that the surplus could be sold commercially. A few years later the delegation returned to see how much the fishing community's prosperity had increased. To its horror, it found them playing with their children, socialising, resting, merry-making and in general

³ This was narrated at an international conference in Toronto in 1968 by Professor Hans Morgenthau, a distinguished academic based at the University of Chicago and a senior government advisor.

enjoying themselves. When asked what they had done with their new boats, they replied that since they could now collect the same amount of fish as before in a quarter of the usual time, they were delighted to have so much free time to do other 'more worthwhile' activities. They also thought that it was not right to plunder the resources of the sea beyond their needs. The US delegation thought them irrational, backward, lacking enterprise and entrepreneurial skills. While some of its members were prepared to be indulgent, others recommended on their return that no further motorised fishing boats should be sent to Kenya.

The point of this example is not that the behaviour of the Kenyan fishermen is beyond criticism or that every way of life is good. We could show that their way of life leaves out important values and is intellectually and morally limited. We could also argue that it is parasitic on modernity, for the fishermen fall ill from time to time, face storms, are injured or incapacitated, and need the achievements of modern science to help them out. The point of this example is twofold. The US delegation was wrong uncritically and unreflectively to universalise its notions of rationality and good life. It failed to understand the Kenyan fisherman's way of life in its own terms, and to appreciate and engage in a sympathetic dialogue with it. It judged that way of life by its own standards and dismissed it out of hand for failing to meet them.

Secondly, it did not appreciate that since every way of life has its permeable and somewhat fuzzy but recognisable identity and its members reason about their common affairs in distinct terms, we cannot hope to persuade them to change their practices and beliefs unless our reasons resonate and link up with theirs. The moral structure or identity of a society defines its horizon of thought, what it values and considers worth pursuing, how it interprets and relates these values, what counts as reasons for it, and what weight it assigns them. Moral and political discourse is about persuading others, 'wooing their consent' as Kant put it, getting them to see the issue in a certain way, and needs to speak in a language and appeal to considerations they share or can be persuaded to share.

In persuading others it is of little help and even counterproductive to bludgeon their intellect into submission and make them look fools by advancing an intricate set of dazzling arguments. They might be rendered speechless but remain unmoved. They might rejoin that just because they cannot come up with counterarguments, it does not follow that others might not or that there are none, and that argumentative cleverness does not signify maturity of judgement and wisdom. Arguments are obviously important, but so are appeals to emotions, self-understanding, moral

values and sense of identity, and the two must go hand in hand. We might, for example, ask our fellow-citizens to choose a particular course of action on the grounds that it alone is worthy of us, would make us an object of respect in the world, would have been approved of by the founding fathers of our country, is in consonance with all that is great in our society, or that a tolerant, free, compassionate and Christian society that ours claims to be cannot act otherwise. These are all reasons but they are not general and impersonal. They are culturally specific, vernacular, related to the moral identity of society, and might have no validity outside it.

This is not at all to deny the important role of general and impersonal reasons and the values based on them in moral and political life. We can give compelling or highly persuasive reasons for those universal values, such as respect for life, human dignity, equal worth and basic human liberties, that arise out of shared human desires, capacities, vulnerabilities and constraints. Appealing to them liberates the moral and political imagination from the grip of the prevailing prejudices, creates a space for critical thought, and both gives the struggle for change a moral depth and links it up with others elsewhere. The universal values however are vague and need to be given a substantive content and related to the circumstances of the society in question. They might not be morally intelligible to or emotionally resonate with the members of society, as is the case with the principle of human equality in a deeply hierarchical society. And they cannot take root unless they are integrated with the prevailing values of society. Appeals to universal values are most effective when translated into or advanced in tandem with the suitably reinterpreted local moral language. In this important sense all moral and political discourse involves an interplay of the local and the universal. The local is not insulated against the demands of the universal and sovereign in its own sphere. Equally the universal is not imperious and hegemonic and must acknowledge the claims of the local.

The ability to combine the local and the universal holds the key to moral and political change. Although the social radicals in India had long advanced intellectually powerful general and impersonal reasons against the practice of untouchability, they made only a limited impact on their countrymen, whereas Mahatma Gandhi, whose arguments were often weak but beautifully blended the general principle of equality with his countrymen's self-understanding, pride and political ambitions, shook its moral roots. Martin Luther King successfully persuaded his fellow Americans to enact civil rights legislation with the help of arguments that

had in other hands proved ineffective. Speaking as both a Christian and an American, he combined the universal principle of human dignity with American history and values, and appealed to both the common humanity and the collective pride and self-understanding of the American people.

I have so far discussed the importance of identity at the collective level and argued that societies conduct their affairs in terms of both general reasons and those specific to their way of life. Identity is just as important, perhaps even more important, at the individual level. Identity here refers to the kind of person one is and wishes to be and the way in which one views and relates to others, that is, to the kind of life or world one builds for oneself.⁴ It has two dimensions. First, it includes one's fundamental beliefs, values, commitments and general orientation to the world. They give purpose and unity to one's life, act as an intellectual and moral compass, reveal what one deeply cares for, determine what features of the world are significant to one and how much, and guide one's choices. Thanks to them, one would not dream of doing certain things or does them with the greatest unease. And conversely one does certain things because one wants to do them as an expression of who one is and wishes to be. Identity is bound up with one's integrity and sense of self-worth, and is the source of such powerful and action-guiding emotions as pride, shame, remorse and guilt. Emotions are a good test of how deeply one holds certain beliefs and how integral they are to one's identity.

Secondly, individual identity includes those persons with whom one identifies, who form an integral part of one's world, with whose lives one's own is deeply intertwined by the ties of loyalty, shared memories and mutual attachment. In these, what I might call, identity-constituting relations, those involved are special, precious, irreplaceable in each other's eyes, and make claims that outsiders cannot. When they need each other's help, it is not just the urgency of the need but the special character of their relationship that gives their claim its particular moral and emotional weight. And one meets the claim not because one has a duty to do so, nor because this is how a moral being should behave, but as an expression of one's commitment to them, that is, for reasons internal to the relationship. To tell one's parents, children or close friends, or even to convey the impression, that one helped them in difficult situations out of a sense of duty, or because it was objectively the right thing to do, would rightly be taken to mean that one either does not understand the nature of the

⁴ For a fuller discussion see my *A New Politics of Identity* (Basingstoke, 2008), chaps. 10–11.

relationship or has unilaterally decided to redefine and change its character. Partiality is central to identity-constituting relations both as their psychological basis and an integral part of their internal morality.

At the individual level, identity-related reasons come into play at two levels, one's fundamental commitments and one's identity-constituting relations. Since the individual has through her previous choices and activities developed a certain character and fashioned herself into a certain kind of person, her integrity and self-respect circumscribe her range of choices and actions. Her life has a certain narrative unity, a wholeness based on the pursuit of certain commitments, and she might consider this an important factor or reason in deciding how to respond to a given situation. When asked why she acted in a certain way, she might say that as a committed Catholic, Buddhist, Quaker or someone who has built her life around a particular set of values, she had no choice but to act in that way. One person might tell a lie to save a friend in desperate circumstances or agree to torture one man to save two lives, but that might not be the choice of another who has based his entire life on the principle of telling the truth or respect for human inviolability.

This does not mean that the argument stops there and those involved cannot be criticised, a point to which I return later, but rather that identity-based reasons do as a matter of fact play an important role in moral life and it is right that they should.⁵ Identity is an important aspect of human life, and to ignore it is to ignore what matters a great deal to human beings. It personalises moral life and makes its requirements less coercive and austere. It is a source of powerful moral emotions, generates moral energy, and can, other things being equal, be a tremendous force for good. It is also tied up with the individual's integrity and sense of self-worth. Individuals are morally at ease with themselves when they are faithful to their fundamental beliefs and commitments, and conversely they do violence to themselves when they act in a manner that goes against the grain, offends their moral character, or introduces radical incoherence in their lives. It is important that human beings should develop and express their individuality and take pride in fashioning themselves into persons of their choice. Respecting the claims of identity is one way to cultivate individuality. Since these are all general and impersonal

⁵ For a helpful account of the role of identity in deciding what to do in a given situation, see P. Winch, *Ethics and Action* (London, 1972), pp. 155–69, and a sympathetic discussion of him in J. Raz, *Engaging Reason: on the Theory of Value and Action* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 239–46.

reasons, we could say that the latter themselves legitimise identity-related reasons.⁶

The case with identity-constituting relations is similar. One cares for those involved because one has over a period of time made certain commitments to them, is bound to them by the ties of mutual expectations and attachments, and has been a beneficiary of their uncalculating kindness, warmth and support. Identity-constituting relations are not just emotional but ethical relations, and their internal morality has a strong personal orientation. One looks after one's parents not because one should in general look after one's parents but because these particular individuals who happen to be one's parents matter to one. Loyal friends do not honour loyalty in the abstract and transfer it to particular individuals. Rather they stand in a highly particularised relationship with each other, and their mutual loyalty is embedded in and an expression of it.⁷ General moral considerations such as reciprocity, kindness, gratitude for the support received, meeting expectations one has aroused, and not exploiting each other's vulnerability and dependence do, of course, inform and regulate identity-constituting relations. However they form only a small part of their morality. What is more, they do not remain external to these relations and regulate these from outside. Rather they are embedded in and woven into the texture of the relations, lose their impersonal character, and get transformed into something quite different.

Commitment, attachment and love that are central to identity-constituting relations are reasons in their own right, and neither can nor need to be justified in terms of general and impersonal reasons. They build up over time, sometimes behind our backs as it were, involve spontaneity and unpredictability, and are not a matter of conscious and calculated choice. It therefore makes little sense to say that one is or should be attached or committed to someone for such and such reasons. Indeed the point of the relationship is lost if it is understood in this way. One can, of course, give some reasons why one loves or is committed to a particular person, but these are never enough and at best explain why one is drawn to her but they do not justify it. It would destroy a relationship and even deprive it of its meaning if one married someone or cultivated a friend because this would increase their own or general happiness or serve some such moral goal. Since attachments do sometimes misguide us,

⁶ I am indebted here to Raz, *Engaging Reason*, pp. 243–5.

⁷ This argument is well developed in K. A. Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ, 2005), pp. 223–37.

blind us to important obligations and breed excessive partiality, they need to be regulated and guided by general and impersonal considerations. However that is quite different from saying that they are legitimate only if justified in terms of the latter. We enter into them for their own sake, that is, independently of general reasons, and the latter's role is often largely regulative.

Since the rationalist ignores the place of identity in human life, he is led to take a highly cerebral and unrealistic view of human motivation, and ignores or even disapproves of the role of emotions or what Kant called 'inclinations' and Spinoza 'passions'. For him human beings are or rather should be not only guided but motivated by reason. This is what their dignity as rational beings requires, and it is also the only way to safeguard the purity of morality. The rationalist therefore concentrates on giving powerful general reasons why one should act or live in a certain way. Such reasons are no doubt important because they guide and regulate emotions and reinforce the motivational force of identity. However they do not provide motives for action except in the case of those rare individuals who have fashioned themselves into pure embodiments of reason, stripped themselves of all identities save that represented by universal reason, and conform to the rationalist image. For the vast majority of men and women, emotions, attachments, commitments, etc. are indispensable sources of motives, and these are often tied up directly or indirectly with identity. One makes certain choices not only or primarily because one should, but rather because certain relevant beliefs have become part of one's self-understanding, are central to the kind of person one is, and leave one no other choice. One cares for one's family and friends not only or so much because one has a duty to do so based on good general and impersonal reasons, but because one loves and identifies with them and sees them as part of one's life. Likewise one obeys the laws of one's country and fights against its injustices not only because general reasons such as consent, fair play and gratitude so require, but also because one identifies with it, sees it as one's country, cares for it, and feels protective about and responsible for it.

To ignore all this and concentrate on the compelling power of general and impersonal reasons alone is to eviscerate moral life of its rich and varied resources. Attachments, affections, and different degrees of identification are a normal and valuable part of human life, and cannot and should not be treated as inconsequential, let alone as an embarrassment. Reason needs to be integrated with identity, work through it, and harness its moral energy. This involves combining an appeal to the intellect with

that to other aspects of the human person, and engaging the whole of him or her. Our legitimate concern to persuade people to conduct themselves in certain ways therefore needs to involve not only powerful general reasons, important as they are, but also cultivating appropriate forms of identification and sentiments and creating their necessary social conditions.

Identity and suspension of reason

In the previous section I argued that the rationalist's failure to appreciate the role of identity results in a narrow and impoverished view of human life. This has led some writers to take the opposite and equally one-sided view which privileges identity and assigns reason an untenably limited role. This view has taken many forms, of which two are most common and influential. For convenience I shall call them the communitarian and commitment views of identity.

For the communitarian, human beings are not transcendental or free-floating individuals of the rationalist imagination.⁸ Rather they are social beings born and raised in a particular community and profoundly shaped by its characteristic ways of thought and life. As a result they see the world in a certain way, cherish certain values and ideals, define the good life in terms of these, and reason about their individual and collective affairs in a particular moral language. They are also embedded in webs of relationship of different degrees of thickness, inherit certain obligations, and develop certain attachments and loyalties. The community 'penetrates the self' and constitutes its innermost nature. The identity of the individual is thus the 'premise' rather than the 'product' of his agency, and is in that sense 'given', a fact of life, an inheritance.⁹

Since the individual is constituted in a certain way, he arrives at his ends not by abstract reasoning but rather by self-reflection and self-knowledge. His 'paradigmatic moral question' is not 'what ends shall I choose?' or 'what do I really feel like or most prefer?' but rather 'who *am*

⁸ The kind of communitarian view discussed here is to be found in A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory* (2nd edn.) (London, 1990); M. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge, 1982); M. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York, 1983); and M. Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA, 1987). Sandel provides a most eloquent and coherent statement of the communitarian view, and so I concentrate on him.

⁹ Sandel, *Liberalism*, pp. 152 and 149.

I, really?'.¹⁰ Self-knowledge or discovering the truth about oneself involves turning the lights inwards, interpreting one's life history, identifying one's 'constituent nature', surveying one's commitments and attachments, and 'acknowledging their respective claims'. Such an ontological exercise, which reveals the compulsions of one's character and identity and in which one's family and friends can play a helpful role, is the basis on which to make meaningful choices and organise one's life.

While the communitarian view of identity is right to stress, as I myself did earlier, that human beings are socially embedded, shaped by their society, bound to certain individuals by the ties of attachments and affections, and inherit certain obligations and commitments, it is one-sided and is ultimately as unconvincing as its rationalist rival. One of its major limitations, which also explains many of its others, is its failure to appreciate the role of reason.

The communitarian view presupposes a single and cohesive community in which individuals are born and raised and by which they are shaped, and that is rarely the case. They are members of and shaped by their ethno-cultural, religious and political communities, and these do not all pull in the same direction. An American, for example, is not only a citizen shaped by the values and ethos of his political community but also a Christian, a Jew or a Hindu, and ethnically Polish, Hungarian or Chinese, and his self-understanding carries the legacy of all of them. His identity is therefore necessarily complex and multi-stranded, not single and homogeneous as the communitarian imagines. Self-discovery or knowing 'what I really am' is not enough because the self one discovers is often internally conflicted and heterogeneous, and requires critical self-reflection to render it coherent, an immensely complex process in which one might sometimes need to step outside the moral resources of one's inherited identity, a point often ignored even by such perceptive communitarians as Sandel and Walzer.

Even assuming that one's identity is reasonably coherent and singular, problems arise. Sandel says that 'being the person I am, I affirm these ends rather than those, turn this way rather than that'.¹¹ He goes on, once I discover who I really am and the 'more or less enduring qualities of [my] character', my choice of ends is decided by 'their suitability to the person I (already) am'.¹² This implies a static and rather simplistic view of the

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 159.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 180.

¹² Ibid.

relation between identity and choice. The question never is one of deducing one's choices from one's identity or asking what the latter requires one to do in a given situation. Our fundamental beliefs and commitments are not a kind of check list that we carry around in our heads, and apply to different situations. Rather we often become clear about them when required to make decisions in concrete situations. They are also general and do not entail a specific course of action except in those relatively rare cases where only one course of action is open to us. Their basic function is to help us define the situation, identify its important aspects, and indicate the range of alternatives open to us. As we reflect on what to do, we might find that our fundamental beliefs have consequences we would not be able to live with or that they do not cohere as easily as we had imagined. We might then reconsider and even revise them. While our choices reflect our identity, they also shape it by reinforcing or revising it, making the process of decision-making not only one of self-discovery but also that of potential self-transformation.

The communitarian assumes that the identity one discovers is morally unproblematic, and that is not always the case. One might be a racist, a religious fanatic, or a narrow nationalist whose constitutive attachments are limited to the members of his racial, religious or political community and whose 'defining projects and commitments' cause serious harm to others or are morally unacceptable. No identity is or can be self-authenticating. It needs to be interrogated and rationally defended, and that involves stepping outside it and offering reasons of a general and impersonal nature. This is what we do when, say, a racist asks us to respect his identity. We ask him to defend his fundamental beliefs, and aim to show that his defence is deeply flawed. We could show that the concept of race is logically incoherent and empirically untenable, that human beings do not neatly divide into races, that no race is internally homogeneous, that the fundamental interests of all human beings deserve respect, and that a racially based society sacrifices worthwhile values and takes its psychological and moral toll on its victims and beneficiaries alike.

Even when the communitarian acknowledges that one's identity should be subjected to rational scrutiny, he lacks the moral resources to do so. Since he is suspicious of universal values and has no coherent way to arrive at them, that avenue is more or less closed to him. He generally appeals to his society's best traditions or ideals, but that does not help either.¹³ He

¹³ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, pp. 312–13, where he says that a society is 'just if its substantive life is lived in a certain way—that is, in a way faithful to the shared understandings of the members'. He

needs to show how he decides which of its several traditions and ideals represents it at its best. And since he denies general principles, he is forced to rely on his arbitrary personal preferences or those of his group. Furthermore, since the communitarian sees commitments and attachments as constitutive of identity, as not just ‘mine’ but ‘me’, questioning and revising them involves a radical break with the kind of person one is. This subjects the moral agent to a double handicap. He lacks the vitally necessary moral and emotional distance from his beliefs and attachments. And he not only has no incentive to reconsider them but a powerful temptation not to lest that should rupture the unity of his life. While the rationalist makes the mistake of seeing beliefs and attachments as contingent and dispensable like a pair of clothes, the communitarian makes the opposite mistake of seeing them as integral and non-detachable, almost as the skin is to the body. If we are to make sense of both the importance we assign to our fundamental beliefs and commitments and our ability to view them critically and revise them, our relation to them must be closer than the rationalist and looser than the communitarian thinks.¹⁴

While the communitarian view is rightly sensitive to the richness, depth and inherited obligations of the communally embedded ethical life, it is far less so to the universalist claims of morality. It has a strong bias in favour of one’s community or those individuals who are part of one’s identity, and gives inadequate recognition to the claims of outsiders. We can give good reasons why the fundamental interests of all human beings make claims on us, and impose at least negative constraints on how we may define and pursue the interests of those with whom we identify and whom we rightly prefer. Citizens are right to ensure the security of their country but not by bombing weaker countries to ashes. And a poor widow may rightly devote herself to caring for her ailing child, but she may not rob her neighbours to pay his medical bills. The communitarian might deny the claims of outsiders, and that is morally obtuse. Or he might acknowledge them without being able to explain why we should give them much importance and what motive we have to act on them. Since we have no constitutive attachments and commitments to outsiders, they can only be a shadowy presence in our moral universe. Their claims

assumes that their self-understanding is morally unproblematic and that no external or universal standards of judgement are available. He modifies his view in *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, but does not adequately explain how universal standards are arrived at and defended within his communitarian framework.

¹⁴ For a good discussion of one way of dealing with this question, see A. Sen, *Identity and Violence: the Illusion of Destiny* (London, 2006).

are constantly in danger of being easily overlooked or ignored and, even when recognised, they carry little motivational force compared to the claims of those we see as part of our identity.

I have so far discussed the communitarian view of identity, and shall now turn to what I have called the commitment view of identity. It is widely held by religious people, but is in no way limited to them. Although it is explicitly espoused by only a few religious persons, it finds different degrees of sympathy among many more.¹⁵ According to this view, human beings have to make a fundamental choice as to what should be the central guiding principle of their lives, the rock on whose unshakable foundations to build the otherwise fragile edifice of their lives. Since this choice is the basis of all others, it cannot itself be based on anything outside it and is a matter of ultimate commitment or faith. Rationalists commit themselves to reason and rely on it to navigate their lives; religious people commit themselves to God and base their lives on His revealed Word. Since rationalism rests on faith, it is argued that it cannot claim superiority over religion. Indeed, the reverse is the case because it is far more rational to trust God's reason than that of the fallible humans. For the believer the sacred text is an inerrant source of Truth, and provides all the guidance one needs to lead the good life. For obvious reasons he cannot sit in judgement on it or pick and choose what he likes or approves of. Since his identity is anchored in and structured by it, he must either accept it in its totality or forfeit his claim to be a true believer.

Although the commitment view of identity has an air of consistency, it is deeply flawed because of its failure to acknowledge the role of reason in shaping the structure and content of the religious identity. It mistakenly puts 'commitment' to reason and to God on the same footing and treats them as logically equivalent. Unlike the latter, the former is largely procedural, basically a commitment to nothing more than being guided by evidence and arguments. It is also in principle self-limiting because if the latter so required, one would relax one's commitment to reason and make space for intuitions, instincts and even faith. The believer needs to explain why he commits himself to God rather than to reason, and that involves using reason to demonstrate its alleged limits. He also needs to show why he thinks that God's will is exhaustively revealed in one religion rather than another. All religions make such claims, and he needs to show

¹⁵ M. E. Marty and R. Scott (eds.), *Fundamentalism Observed*, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1991–3) and M. Choueri, *Islamic Fundamentalism* (London, 1990). For much of the subsequent discussion I draw on my *A New Politics of Identity*.

in a non-circular way (that is, by general and impersonal reasons) why other religions than his own are mistaken. The believer insists on adhering to his religion in preference to others, and needs to give his reasons. He might either say that it is superior to all others, and that involves giving general reasons. Or he might say that he is born and raised into it and cannot abandon it. He has grown up with numerous beliefs and practices some of which he is bound to have given up or revised, and he needs to show why he makes religion an exception. If he belongs to a proselytising religion, he is in the paradoxical situation of wanting others to enjoy and exercise the freedom to give up the religion of their birth while inconsistently denying it in relation to himself.

Rational scrutiny also extends to the believer's reading of the scripture. The latter can be read in symbolic, metaphysical, allegorical or literal terms, and the believer needs to explain why he opts for the last. The moral principles enjoined by the scripture are necessarily abstract and general, and require interpretation and contextualisation. The meaning and scope of 'thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife' depends on whether 'covet' includes a serious infatuation or a mere passing desire, who counts as one's neighbour, and whether the prohibition is limited to the wife in the narrow sense of the term or also includes married or unmarried daughters and sisters. Such ambiguities characterise all general injunctions, and in each case the believer needs to defend his particular interpretation.

The religious identity then is open to rational scrutiny at various levels, ranging from the belief in God to ways of interpreting and living by its injunctions. This is even more true of cultural, national and other identities. None of them is a matter of blind or uncritical commitment, and in all of them the individual needs to decide how to interpret them, relate them to each other, and what importance to give each in her life. The way in which we sometimes talk about identity gives the misleading impression that it is a kind of first principle that cannot be probed further. When one calls oneself a Catholic, a liberal, a Jew or a pacifist and claims that one must or must not *therefore* do certain things, one seems to deduce one's choices and actions from one's identity and to give no reasons for them. In fact this is not the case.

When one says, for example, that one is a Catholic and hence opposed to abortion, one says a number of things. One indicates where one is coming from and what one's basic beliefs are. One signals one's reasons but does not state them because one assumes that others are familiar with the Catholic views on the subject. One also indicates why certain reasons carry considerable moral weight with one. 'As a Catholic' is not a dogmatic and

discussion-stopping expression. Rather it is a condensed statement of one's beliefs and reasons. This is equally true when one says that 'as a liberal' one is opposed to banning a particular book or play or extending government's powers. One does not assert one's identity and hide behind it; rather one gestures towards one's reasons by pointing to the identity which one feels confident one's audience knows how to unpack. It is precisely because 'Catholic', 'liberal', and other such identity-signifying terms are condensed statements of reasons that the argument does not stop here. We decode the reasons and examine them critically at various levels. We engage the Catholic in a debate and ask him why he thinks that a foetus is a person or has the same moral status, why this view is not to be found in early Christian writings, why it enjoys little support among non-Catholic Christians and other great religions, why he values the life of a foetus so highly when he seems to see nothing wrong with wars that take innocent lives, why he so heavily privileges life over love or *caritas* which demands concern for the suffering of the woman and the traumas of her unwanted future child, and so on. We do the same with the bearers of other identities, unpacking in each case their underlying reasons and subjecting them to a rational scrutiny.

Conclusion

In this lecture my main concern has been to maintain the following two theses. First, identity, both cultural and personal, plays an inescapable and valuable role in human life, and reasons based on it are a legitimate class of reasons. Moral reasons are not all general and impersonal, and include and need to be balanced against identity-related reasons.

Second, identity is not a reason-free zone. As reflective and self-determining beings, human beings are responsible for their fundamental beliefs and commitments, and need to reassure themselves that they can give good reasons for them. Furthermore their identity makes demands on and has significant consequences for others, and they owe it to them to justify it. This can only be done in terms of reasons others share, and these are general and impersonal in nature.

Moral life then involves general and impersonal as well as identity-related reasons, and has both local and universal, and personal and impersonal, dimensions. This raises the large and important question of how the two sets of reasons are related. Since this is not my main concern

and involves too complex an inquiry to be undertaken here, a few general remarks should suffice.

As I argued earlier, identity-related reasons are morally acceptable only if the identity in question is itself defensible on general and impersonal grounds. If it is not, as in the case of a racist, an anti-Semite, a narrow nationalist or a sexist, reasons based on it lack legitimacy and are overridden. Even when an identity is morally defensible, the fact that it authorises a particular practice or action does not constitute a conclusive reason for the latter. The practice might offend against values which we have good reasons to uphold or might have consequences we consider unacceptable. Our response then depends on a number of general considerations, such as how central the practice is to the agent's identity, the importance of the values it offends against, the degree to which it does so, the likely consequence of disallowing it, and whether it is likely to disappear with the passage of time and is best left alone. We may decide to tolerate it or ban it altogether. This is a matter of judgement based on balancing respect for identity and general moral and prudential reasons.¹⁶

Identity-related reasons are valid when they do not go against general and impersonal reasons, and acquire considerable salience when the latter are inconclusive, evenly balanced or incommensurate. The latter then not only leave room for choice but demand it. The choice does not necessarily involve an appeal to identity, for the moral agent might decide to toss a coin, consult a friend, or act on an impulse. Identity comes into play when the choice engages her fundamental beliefs and commitments and is of considerable moral importance to her.

When she takes a decision on the basis of her identity-related reasons, she is claiming that it is the right course of action *for her*. She is not making the general statement that it is the right course of action *in her view*, because she would then be recommending it to others and would need to defend it by giving general reasons. She is limiting the validity of the claim to herself, saying no more than that it is in her view the right thing for her to do, leaving others to decide what course of action is right for them. She has based her life on certain principles, sought to give it a certain narrative unity, and would be false to herself and all she stands for if she acted otherwise. When two individuals claim that two quite different courses of action from among those permitted by general and impersonal reasons are right *for them*, they can both be correct. They do not contradict each

¹⁶ I discuss these issues at length in my *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (2nd edn.) (Basingstoke, 2006), chap. 9.

other, which would be the case if they were making general claims or appealing to opposite principles. Rather they both invoke identity-related reasons which, given their different identities, lead to different choices.¹⁷

Since moral life involves both a unique moral agent with his distinct cultural and personal identity and a set of rationally defended universal principles and values, a theoretical account of it is satisfactory only if it is able to reconcile their respective demands. In order to construct such a moral theory, we need to appreciate two things.

First, commitment to reason should not be equated with that to rationalism. Rationalism is a particular view of reason, of its nature, reach, mode of operation and relation to other human capacities, and does not have the monopoly of reason. One might reject it in favour of a more limited, modest and self-critical view of reason which is closer to truth and saves reason from getting discredited by making less extravagant claims on its behalf. The distinction between reason and rationalism is broadly similar to that between liberty and liberalism. The latter is a theory of liberty, defining it and relating it to equality, justice and other great values in a particular way, and assigning it central importance in human life. One might value liberty without taking the standard liberal individualist view of it. And those who reject liberalism are not necessarily the enemies of liberty. Indeed, insofar as they take a richer, broader and more realistic view of liberty, they might be its better friends. We are more likely to reconcile reason and identity if we avoid a narrowly rationalist view of reason.

Secondly, rationality is a collective human achievement and not the property of an isolated individual. It involves critically interrogating our beliefs and practices, and is only possible if we are able to imagine that they do not represent the final and incontrovertible truth. Since imagination does not arise and operate in a vacuum, this in turn presupposes that we have available to us other ways of thought to act as our critical interlocutors, to challenge and highlight the partiality of our own, and to offer different and complementary perspectives. The plurality of ways of thought and a dialogue between them is thus one of the necessary preconditions of rationality. As beings embedded in particular cultures and bearers of particular identities, we reason from within them, but we are

¹⁷ Stuart Hampshire puts this well: 'This is my ground and I must stand on it: I do not claim that everyone everywhere must do what I do: but this is my character, and, because it is, I must act in this way': *Morality and Character* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), p. 8. See also pp. 133–5 for a discussion of this view.

not their prisoners because of our access to and ability to engage critically with other identities. Reason catches glimpses of universality and objectivity not by denying, transcending or leaping over cultures and identities but rather by working its way through them. Its success in realising its legitimate universalist ambition is likely to be greater the more varied and richer are the identities available to it and the more sympathetic and critical is its engagement with them.