

Helvétius, Enemy or Friend of Freedom?

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I

Our purpose shall be to consider the philosophical opinions of Isaiah Berlin on the subject of Claude-Adrien Helvétius. In *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty*¹, Berlin devotes his first chapter to Helvétius. In this chapter Helvétius is quoted four times. We shall begin our investigation with an analysis of these quotes. The first is a rather lengthy parable with God doing the hypothetical talking. Helvétius writes,

I endow thee with sensibility. It is by this alone that thou, blind tool of my wishes, incapable of plumbing my aims, thou must, without knowing it, fulfil my purposes. Over thee I set pleasure and pain; the one and the other will watch over thy thoughts and acts, excite thy aversions, friendships, tender sentiments, joys, set on fire thy desires, fears, hopes, reveal to thee truths, plunge thee in error, and after causing thee to generate a million various absurd systems of morals and legislation, will one day disclose to thee the simple principles on the development of which depend the order and happiness of the moral world.²

In response Berlin remarks, “What is this but the first clear formulation of the principle of utilitarianism?”³ Whether or not this passage is the first, or an especially clear articulation of the “principle of utilitarianism” is perhaps open to debate. But there is no debate as to whether or not Helvétius is a proponent of utilitarianism, and it is certain that Berlin might have chosen any number of passages that would have served to make his point more succinctly. For example, Helvétius writes that education should be directed toward, “The greatest public utility; that is, the greatest pleasure, and the greatest happiness,

1 *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty*, Princeton University Press, 2002. All passages cited are from this edition. The other “enemies” considered are Rousseau, Fichte, Hegel, Saint-Simon and Maistre.

2 Page 13. Reference given is *De l'esprit* 3.9. No translator is credited.

3 Page 13.

of the largest number of citizens.”⁴ And Helvétius also writes, “...let the magistrate... oppose the establishment of every dogma, every principle inconsistent with sound morality, that is to say, with the public utility.”⁵

Berlin next quotes Helvétius when he states, “We must substitute 'the language of interest', as he puts it, 'for the tone of injury'.”⁶ This comment is made in the context of Berlin suggesting that for Helvétius reformers, “...must not try to convert people by reasoning, because their reason is not powerful enough...”⁷ How the quoting and coupling of the two brief phrases in question demonstrates this contention is not made evident. Further, one might argue that the contention is false insofar as Helvétius makes it quite obvious that he believes there to be almost nothing beyond the capacity of education to accomplish. For example Helvétius writes that for men, “...to be happy and powerful nothing more is requisite than to perfect the science of education.”⁸ If the science of education is amenable to being perfected, then certainly the capacity of people to be converted by reasoning is more than sufficient. Now, it is true that Helvétius often suggests that secrecy will be required for society to change and for education to have its desired effect⁹, but in no place does Helvétius invite the interpretation of Berlin by suggesting that reasoning cannot be ultimately effective in solving all of the problems of society that are capable of resolution and in leading men to the greatest happiness of which they are capable.

Berlin also cites Helvétius when he explains, “'I do not care', said Helvétius, 'if men be vicious so long as they are intelligent. [...] Laws will do everything.’”¹⁰ This passage is translated differently by Hooper, whose version

4 *A Treatise on Man (De L'Homme)*, translated by W. Hooper, London, 1771, presented in two volumes. Volume I, Section I, Chapter X, page 45. All future references are from this edition.

5 Volume I, Section I, Chapter XV, page 72.

6 Page 18. Reference given is *De l'esprit* 2.15. No translator is credited.

7 Page 17.

8 Volume I, Introduction, Chapter II, page 4.

9 We shall return to this question in section III.

10 Page 18. [Square brackets] are Berlin's. Reference given is *De l'homme* 9.6. No translator is

reads, “It is of little consequence that men be vicious; it is enough that they be intelligent... Laws do all.”¹¹ Which translation is more accurate? Helvétius himself writes originally, “Peu importe que les hommes soient vicieux; c'en est assez, s'ils sont éclairés... Les loix sont tout.”¹² Thus we see that Hooper offers a more accurate translation than does Berlin. For Berlin to translate *peu importe* as *I do not care* rather than *it is of little consequence*, or something to that effect such as *it does not matter*, is to change the meaning. And it is surely wrong to suggest that Helvétius does not care if men are vicious. Quite the opposite, he cares very much that men are in his opinion *vicious by nature*. And his hope is that in a well-governed society, one with good legislation in effect, this characteristic will be if not removed, at least abated to the greatest extent possible. The point that Helvétius is making in the mistranslated passage is the suggestion that it does not ultimately matter if men are in fact by nature vicious or if they are made to be that way through a bad education insofar as regardless of which is the case this characteristic, however it ultimately originates, can be minimized through a proper system of legislation. Helvétius is absolutely not indicating that he wants vicious, intelligent men roaming the earth. But this appears to be the false impression that Berlin, through his deployment of a mistranslation, wishes to leave.

Finally, Berlin cites another parable,

Let us flee from this greedy and cruel animal, this monster in whose voracious jaws we and our cities will be swallowed up. Why can it not behave like lions and tigers? These kindly animals do not destroy our dwellings; they do not batten upon our blood. Just avengers of crime, they punish sheep for the cruelty sheep inflict upon us.¹³

Berlin interprets this passage as suggesting that in the opinion of Helvétius,

credited.

11 Volume Two, Section IX, Chapter VI, page 301.

12 *De L'Homme*, A Londres, MDCCLXXVI, Section IX, Chapitre VI, page 462.

13 Page 23. Reference given is *De l'esprit* 2.2. No translator is credited.

“The business of the legislator is so to transform human beings that they shall no longer be preyed upon by ignorance...”¹⁴ This seems reasonable. But the citation of a parable may be curious insofar as there are simple and clear passages wherein Helvétius makes the same claim in no uncertain or allegorical terms. For example Helvétius writes, “Destroy ignorance and you will destroy all the seeds of moral evil.”¹⁵ And he further observes, “Ignorance not only plunges the people into effeminacy, but even extinguishes in them the sentiment of humanity. The most ignorant are the most barbarous.”¹⁶

We have now considered *all* of the quotes that Berlin offers in support of his various arguments. It is thus clear that Berlin bases his attacks upon little direct citing of passages. The four texts that he does cite do not prove to be particularly useful in support of his contentions, and the remainder of what he attributes to Helvétius is expressed through paraphrase. While there is nothing improper with a certain amount of paraphrasing, the almost exclusive use of paraphrase is a potentially worrisome approach. For the immediate possibility that Berlin is simply constructing a straw-man presents itself. Therefore as we analyse the criticisms that Berlin levels it will be necessary to look carefully for any possible mischaracterisations that may exist within the various paraphrases that he offers.

II

Berlin notes that the principal question guiding his work is, “Why should anyone obey anyone else?”¹⁷ Simply put and clearly articulated, this is perhaps the fundamental question of all moral and political theory. Berlin will express the opinion that we should *not* obey anyone else for the reasons that Helvétius or any of the other “enemies of freedom” sets forth. He opines that Helvétius

14 Page 23.

15 Volume II, Section VI, Chapter I, page 77.

16 Volume II, Section VI, Chapter I, page 77.

17 Page 1.

along with the others, “...were all born in what might be called the dawn of our own period... at the beginning of a period of which we are perhaps living at the end...”¹⁸ This is a very interesting notion indicating a sort of grand historical perspective. Berlin explains that this period, “...is often referred to as that of liberal democracy, or of the ascendancy of the middle class.”¹⁹ Further, Berlin writes that, “...it is clear that these [six enemies] are the earliest thinkers to speak a language which is still directly familiar to us.”²⁰ Thus if we are living today in the same time period then we are living later in and perhaps towards the end of the time period during which Helvétius and the others lived at or near the beginning. Berlin adds, “When Helvétius denounces ignorance or cruelty or injustice or obscurantism... [he speaks] to us and to our age.”²¹ Again Berlin is suggesting a pattern to the development of history during a certain time period and the placement of his enemies within this pattern and time period. Further to this Berlin writes that the enemies are important because,

...the kind of situation to which they seem relevant, which they seem to have perceived, to have described with an uncanny insight, is often characteristic not so much of the nineteenth century as of the twentieth. It is our period and our time which they seem to analyse with astonishing foresight and skill.²²

To be sure, many of the problems that have always existed continue to exist. And Helvétius it may be contended is as relevant today as he was during his own times. But we shall soon observe that the reason for the disastrous nature of this time period in the opinion of Berlin is the continued influence of the six enemies of freedom and liberty, the philosophies that they espouse, and the effects that they have had and continue to have upon the ever-developing history of mankind. Berlin will contend that the enemies are in some manner

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19 Page 2.

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21 Page 2/3. Berlin does not define *obscurantism*.

22 Page 3.

the cause of, or responsible for many of the more disastrous historical events that have taken place throughout the unfolding of the specified time period. That is why they are deemed to be enemies.

Berlin suggests that Helvétius and the others each possessed the desire to present a coherent single vision and that, “What they did was bind it upon their disciples, their readers...”²³ Here we begin to see more accurately the concern that Berlin wishes to express. His fear is that these thinkers offer their solutions to the ills of mankind as a prescription, as a sort of medication. His fear is that they would impose their views upon mankind, or “bind” mankind to them. This in our own opinion is a fair characterization of Helvétius and we shall support Berlin with respect to this general concern. Helvétius would certainly impose his system of “education” upon mankind if he had his wish.²⁴ The remaining question is whether or not the diagnosis and the prescription is appropriate in the circumstances, or instead a case of malpractice. And for Isaiah Berlin, Helvétius is not the doctor that mankind is searching for.

Berlin writes that Helvétius and the other thinkers performed philosophy, “...not by answering questions which had been put before, but by altering the nature of the questions themselves...”²⁵ Thus Berlin intimates that the *Enlightenment* took place as a result of what might be termed as a shift or a transition in the manner in which philosophy was being conducted. Helvétius and the other enemies of freedom and liberty began thinking in a new way. This new mode of philosophy in the opinion of Berlin caused its readers to see things, “...in a very different light.”²⁶ Readers were, “...affected by them [the six enemies] as one is affected by someone who suddenly transforms one's view of things by placing them in a different relationship from that in which they were

23 Page 4.

24 Again, we shall return to this question in section III.

25 Page 4.

26 Page 4.

before.”²⁷ This for Berlin is the defining characteristic of the historical time period known as the *Enlightenment*. A time period that for Berlin extends to our own present day and beyond. We ourselves are said by Berlin to be living later within and perhaps near the end of this same time period. Not after it.

Berlin writes next that, “This kind of tampering can of course be very dangerous, and can cast both light and darkness upon humanity.”²⁸ Tampering? By this Berlin suggests what he has already alluded to, what we might in modern terms define as *thinking outside of the box* philosophically. The nature of the questions has according to Berlin been knowingly and deliberately altered by the thinkers themselves. This is *tampering*. And the results can be either good or bad, they can cast either light or darkness. We must admit that it is difficult to disagree with Berlin on this question. Consider the profound impact of Karl Marx upon the world. Without the “tampering” of Marx there exists no Lenin, no Stalin, no Mao Zedong. Perhaps more directly to the point, one might ask whether or not Mussolini or Hitler could have arisen had Nietzsche not “tampered” with his *revaluation of values* and his theory of the *übermensch*? Berlin places Helvétius at the beginning of this disastrous historical process. And he argues further that utilitarianism has been, “...used as the justification for both Communism and Fascism...”²⁹ Now, it is certain of course that such literature exists. Many communist theorists appeal to utilitarian sorts of arguments. But we ourselves are aware of no serious case of Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin or Mao Zedong propounding the theories of Helvétius, Bentham or Mill in order to justify their own personal conduct. These men appealed only to their own authority. And the suggestion on the part of Berlin that the vast calamities that took place in the first half of the 20th century have their roots in utilitarianism, and therefore ultimately in the person of Helvétius

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29 Page 27.

himself, remains at best hypothetical and unproven. We have already implied that if the most outrageous calamities of the 20th century were World War II and the Holocaust, then the only philosopher who *may arguably* be held responsible for “tampering” in this context is the philosopher whose thinking lead directly to the advent of the well-read and self-styled *übermenschen* Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini. And that philosopher is Friedrich Nietzsche, it is not Helvétius.

Berlin observes that Helvétius and the others speak of being in favour of “human liberty” but contends that their, “...doctrines are inimical to what is normally meant by... individual liberty, or political liberty.”³⁰ Locke and Mill are noted as the theorists of liberty that Helvétius and the others are inimical, or opposed to. And the specific theory that Helvétius and the others reject in the opinion of Berlin is,

...the right freely to shape one's life as one wishes, the production of circumstances in which men can develop their natures as variously and richly... as possible. The only barrier to this is formed by the need to protect other men in respect of the same rights, or else to protect the common security of them all.³¹

We must immediately ask, what has Helvétius written that would indicate opposition to this general definition of human liberty? It sounds very much like something that Helvétius would propose. For example Helvétius writes,

“When the laws are good, private interest will never be destructive of that of the public: every one will be employed in pursuing his felicity; every one will be fortunate and just; because every one will perceive that his happiness depends upon that of his neighbour.”³²

Helvétius also contends that, “...the preservation of [private] property is the moral divinity of empires; as it there maintains domestic peace, and makes equity flourish...”³³ And Helvétius believes that, “Every wise legislation that

30 Page 5.

31 Page 5/6.

32 Volume II, Recapitulation, Chapter II, page 469.

33 Volume II, Section X, Chapter VII, page 416.

unites private and public interest, and founds virtue on the advantage of each individual, is indestructible.”³⁴ How are these passages taken as a general definition opposed to the concept of human liberty? Helvétius appears to ascribe to persons all liberties excepting those that would restrict the legitimate liberties of other persons. It is therefore difficult to completely agree with Berlin when he suggests that the theories of Helvétius are inimical to, or opposed to human liberty.

Berlin also argues that, “...the six [enemies of freedom] were hostile to liberty, their doctrines were in certain obvious respects a direct contradiction of it...”³⁵ He writes further that, “...their influence upon mankind not only in the nineteenth century, but particularly in the twentieth, was powerful in this anti-libertarian direction.”³⁶ Herein lies the expression of Berlin's principal concern. We observe that Berlin defines himself as a *libertarian* and contends that Helvétius and the others advocate principles that contradict libertarianism in “certain obvious respects”. No mention is made of these certain respects, presumably because they are so obvious. Does Helvétius in fact articulate principles that oppose what may generally be termed *libertarianism* today? Does Helvétius argue against the right freely to shape one's life as one wishes, or against the production of circumstances in which men can develop their natures as variously and richly as possible? Helvétius writes in answer to this question, “But among the principles or laws proper to all societies, which is the first and most sacred? That which secures to every one his property, his life, and his liberty.”³⁷ We contend therefore that Berlin has not made this case.

III

Berlin writes of Helvétius that,

34 Volume II, Section IX, Chapter IV, page 295.

35 Page 6.

36 Page 6.

37 Volume I, Section I, Chapter XIII, page 57.

His lifelong aim was the search for a single principle which was to define the basis of morality and really answer the question about how society should be founded and how man should live... with the same degree of scientific authority that Newton had displayed in the realm of physics.³⁸

This seems to be a reasonable statement. Berlin comments further that for Helvétius, “The pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain are the only motives which in fact act upon men...”³⁹ This is certainly an acceptable paraphrasing of the opinion of Helvétius. And there exists a variety of texts that demonstrate this particular claim, some of which place the principle of pleasure versus pain into the larger context of the entire philosophical program that Helvétius develops. For example Helvétius writes that, “Pleasure and pain are the bonds by which private interest may be always united with that of the nation: they both take their source from corporeal sensibility. The sciences of morality and legislation cannot therefore be anything else than deductions from this simple principle...”⁴⁰

Berlin also suggests that for Helvétius the principle of pleasure versus pain leads to an answer to the question, “What are the proper ends for man?”⁴¹ He writes that in the opinion of Helvétius if people are conditioned by the love of pleasure and the hatred of pain, “...then they will be happy if they go on pursuing pleasure, frictionlessly, efficiently and eternally.”⁴² This does not seem inaccurate. Berlin then asks the question, why in the opinion of Helvétius are men not happy? He contends that Helvétius answers, “...this is because they have been ignorant and because they have been frightened... The rulers are interested in keeping their subjects in darkness because otherwise the injustice, the arbitrariness, the immorality, the irrationality of their own rule will be

38 Page 12.

39 Page 13.

40 Volume II, Recapitulation, Chapter I, page 470.

41 Page 14.

42 Page 14.

altogether too easily exposed.”⁴³ This is perhaps a reasonable articulation of the position of Helvétius with respect to the situations of *certain* countries at *certain* points in time, and certainly with respect to his own country during his own time. But Helvétius does not hold this to be a necessary universal condition. While he may describe France in such a manner, Helvétius does not suggest the same to be true of England. Helvétius opines that, “If men be commonly frank, loyal, industrious, and humane, under a free government; and mean, false, and vile, without genius, and without courage, under a despotic government, the difference in their characters is the effect of the different education received under those different governments.”⁴⁴

Berlin continues to paraphrase when he writes, “The only business of the expert, or the philosopher, is simply to create a universe in which the ends men have to seek because they cannot help it are obtained with the least pain, most efficiently, most rapidly, most economically.”⁴⁵ Berlin adds that for Helvétius we should obey others, “If this or that course of action leads to greater happiness- if, that is, it conforms to the ends set for us by nature...”⁴⁶ All of this seems at least plausible as an interpretation. Berlin suggests next that Helvétius, “...thinks him [man] neither benevolent nor malevolent... a kind of natural stuff in which nature and circumstances, but above all education, shape as they will. He therefore thinks that it is of no use merely to try to improve mankind by argument.”⁴⁷ The second half of this statement is blatantly self-contradictory. It is true that for Helvétius men are neither malevolent nor benevolent at birth. For example Helvétius writes that, “...man is not born, but becomes what he is.”⁴⁸ But if education can shape people, and education involves argument and reasoning, then by definition argument and reasoning can shape people. To this

43 Page 14.

44 Volume II, Section X, Chapter I, page 393.

45 Page 15.

46 Page 15.

47 Page 16.

48 Volume I, Section II, Chapter XV, page 173, footnote*.

effect Helvétius writes, “When the obstacles that a stupid religion or tyranny set to the progress of morality are removed, mankind may flatter themselves with seeing the science of education carried to the highest degree of perfection of which it is susceptible.”⁴⁹

Berlin continues, “How is this [the uselessness of argument and reasoning] to be remedied? Only by artificial manipulation.”⁵⁰ What does Berlin intend when deploys this terminology? He suggests that Helvétius does not believe in eternal progress, but that, “...there will be progress if a sufficient number of enlightened men with resolute wills and with a disinterested passion to improve mankind set themselves to promote it, above all if they convert the rulers of mankind- the kings, the ministers- and teach them the art of government...”⁵¹ This seems correct. For example Helvétius writes that, “...it is to the philosophers... that mankind will owe this first and sole principle of morality; *the public good is the supreme law.*”⁵² Berlin next states that, “The philosopher... must create an artificial system of rewards and punishments which will reward men whenever they do what in fact leads to greater happiness, and punish them when in fact they do what diminishes it.”⁵³ This is not an accurate paraphrasing in our view. First, Helvétius does not consider it the business of the philosopher to create a “system of rewards and punishments”, artificial or otherwise. He considers it to be the duty of the prince, the magistrates, or the legislators. And further, for Helvétius there is nothing “artificial” about a system of laws designed to suit or accommodate man's *natural* state, or way of being. Berlin also observes that, “He [the philosopher] must do so [seek to control man] by legislation and by inventing a system of sticks and carrots for the human donkey.”⁵⁴ We believe this to be

49 Volume II, Section X, Chapter X, page 437.

50 Page 16.

51 Page 16.

52 Volume II, Section X, Chapter XI, page 436.

53 Page 17.

54 Page 17.

essentially correct. For example Helvétius writes, “Being once assured that man always acts in conformity to his own interest, the legislature [not the philosopher] may assign so many punishments to vice, and so many rewards to virtue, that every individual will find it in his interest to be virtuous.”⁵⁵ Does this amount to “artificial manipulation”, or to a natural form of governance given the fundamental characteristic of mankind?

Berlin adds that for Helvétius, “What human motives are is totally irrelevant.”⁵⁶ This is a mischaracterisation, and the opposite is surely the case. Men's motives are always in their own self-interest, therefore they are absolutely relevant when seeking to determine a proper system of legislation designed to allow men to pursue their own natural and necessary tendencies while at the same time not infringing upon the ability of others to exercise equivalent freedoms. Berlin also opines that, “It is this that forms the heart of modern utilitarianism.”⁵⁷ Perhaps so, but an investigation into the heart of modern utilitarianism is well beyond our present scope. And that of Berlin. At this point the criticisms are aimed at utilitarianism as a general theory of morality rather than at Helvétius as a specific proponent of some version of that theory.

This line of reasoning is advanced farther when Berlin writes that, “One of the direct consequences of this doctrine [utilitarianism] is an odd corollary about human rights.”⁵⁸ Berlin suggests that, “Eighteenth century philosophers too talked a great deal about rights and indeed believed in them very strongly, but of course this is not consistent with a really thoroughgoing utilitarianism.”⁵⁹ This for Berlin is because, “To have a right which nobody may impinge upon... is an obstacle to the transformation of society in the direction of the greatest

55 Volume II, Section IX, Chapter VI, page 292.

56 Page 17.

57 Page 18.

58 Page 20/1.

59 Page 21.

happiness for the greatest number.”⁶⁰ Perhaps so, but perhaps not. This is a very large question. And once more it is not a question specific to Helvétius, it is a more general concern with respect to utilitarianism itself.

Berlin also contends that for Helvétius, “...all ultimate ends are compatible with each other. They cannot clash.”⁶¹ Helvétius writes, “Justice then supposes the establishment of laws. The observance of justice supposes an equilibrium in the power of the inhabitants. The maintenance of that equilibrium is the masterpiece of the science of legislation.”⁶² Therefore Berlin's claim may be plausible. Berlin next offers informs us that, “This proposition has often been refuted by human experience. For example, liberty, which is an ultimate purpose of some, has at times been found to be incompatible with equality, which is often an ultimate goal for others.”⁶³ Perhaps so. But again Berlin attacks utilitarianism generally rather than Helvétius specifically.

Berlin continues his analysis with, “...when, as a result of the *social conditioning* [our italics] effected by the laws established by the enlightened philosophers [Helvétius refers to the legislators], enough men have for a sufficient length of time done nothing but what contributes to happiness, then, in fact, they will *insensibly* [our italics] acquire new and beneficent habits.”⁶⁴ This seems to be an accurate assessment of Helvétius so long as it is applied to legislators rather than to philosophers. And it is our contention that Berlin has with this observation finally presented a potentially serious objection to the entire philosophical program that Helvétius advances. Berlin accuses Helvétius of suggesting that philosophers [legislators] should take it upon themselves to “insensibly” implement “social conditioning”. In confirmation of Berlin's concern Helvétius writes,

60 Page 21.

61 Page 24.

62 Volume I, Section IV, Chapter VIII, page 298.

63 Page 24.

64 Page 18.

Have I a new truth to present to the world? The truth, almost always too difficult for the generality of men, is at first comprehended but by a small number of them. If I would have it generally received, I must previously prepare their minds; I must lead them to it by degrees, and at last bring them to a point of view from whence they may distinctly behold it.⁶⁵

Helvétius also notes that providing good legislation rests in, "...the discovery of means by which a people may be made to pass *insensibly* [our italics] from the state of misery they suffer, to the state of happiness they might enjoy."⁶⁶ And Helvétius also informs us that the project of equalizing wealth, "...could not, and ought not to be executed, but by continual and *insensible* [our italics] alterations..."⁶⁷ Society for Helvétius is to be gradually altered without itself realizing that it is being so altered. The truth is too difficult to comprehend otherwise. To this effect Berlin paraphrases, "The automatic production of happiness through the conditioning of society by men who have grasped the few, necessary rules about the right government of mankind... -that is the way to educate mankind."⁶⁸ This appears to be an accurate portrayal on the part of Berlin. For Helvétius contends that, "When truth shall enlighten princes, happiness and virtue will reign under them in every empire."⁶⁹ Of course this passage might be taken in any number of ways. But Berlin contends that,

For the tyranny of ignorance, of fear, of superstitious priests, of arbitrary kings... it [the philosophy of Helvétius] substitutes another tyranny, a technological tyranny, a tyranny of reason, which, however, is just as inimical to liberty, just as inimical to the notion that one of the most valuable things in human life is choice for the sake of choice, not merely choice of what is good, but choice as such.⁷⁰

We are sympathetic to these general sentiments. The secretiveness that

65 Volume I, Section VIII, Chapter XVI, page 273.

66 Volume II, Section IX, Chapter I, page 272.

67 Volume II, Section VIII, Chapter IV, page 203.

68 Page 18/19.

69 Volume II, Section IX, Chapter V, page 299.

70 Page 27.

Helvétius advocates leads quickly to precisely these sorts of concerns.

Does Helvétius have a response? Yes. He explains, “...let no one be astonished at human imbecility: men, being in general badly educated, are what they ought to be; their extreme credulity rarely leaving them the free exercise of their reason, they in consequence form wrong judgments and are unhappy.”⁷¹ In other words, because people are imbeciles, the only way to educate them is to do so secretly, for they will not grasp their “education” otherwise, they are too stupid to do so. Helvétius also writes that, “...man is not borne compassionate, but that all may and will become so when the laws, the form of government, and their education lead them to it.”⁷² In other words, laws will secretly, imperceptibly *lead* men to a level of compassion that they do not naturally possess. It is clear that Helvétius requires a defence to the charge that he would change men slowly, insensibly and imperceptibly, and without allowing them to know what is taking place. For in fact Helvétius admits that this is precisely what he would do. And he seems to suggest farther that due to the imbecilic nature of mankind as a whole this is the only possible manner of inducing the prescribed changes.

Berlin continues,

How is the good, new society to be organized? Certainly it cannot be a democracy, for people are often stupid and often vicious, and we know that if we are guided by public opinion we shall seldom get anything done, because men have dealt in darkness too long to be able to know what to do when they suddenly find themselves in the light of day.⁷³

Is this an accurate paraphrasing, or is Berlin offering a mischaracterisation when he suggests that Helvétius is opposed to democracy? Helvétius writes that, “...every legitimate sovereignty is founded on election, on the free choice

71 Volume II, Section IX, Chapter XVIII, page 340.

72 Volume II, Section V, Chapter III, page 18.

73 Page 21.

of the people.”⁷⁴ We are perhaps beginning to understand why it is that Berlin relies so heavily upon paraphrase.

A very strange argument is offered next. Berlin writes, “...in the kind of universe which Helvétius depicts there is little or no room for individual liberty. In his world men may become happy, but the notion of liberty eventually disappears. It disappears because liberty to do evil disappears...”⁷⁵ In other words, Berlin suggests that we are not free unless we are free to do evil. He argues that we should be free, therefore he is committed to the proposition that we should be free to do evil. Berlin has advocated libertarianism and he has rejected utilitarianism, but this sound like something worse than anarchy. Of course Berlin does not mean to suggest exactly that we should be free to commit murder, or any other crime, on the grounds that we would not be free unless we were permitted to do so. But what then is his point? Berlin adds with respect to the liberty to do evil, “...that kind of liberty will be gradually weeded out altogether by successful education.”⁷⁶ Here then is his point. By education Berlin intimates something closer to brainwashing. But this is once more a mischaracterisation of the opinions expressed by Helvétius. For Helvétius does not argue that with proper education and correct legislation it will become logically impossible for men to commit crimes because that kind of liberty will be “weeded out altogether”. This is an almost ridiculous notion. Men could still make such choices, they will always have the power to do so, and it will always be in their nature to try to get away with whatever they believe they will not be punished for. Helvétius does not believe in the “natural goodness” of mankind. The point is that for Helvétius education will allow men to realize that they do not have any interest in exercising certain freedoms if the laws in place are sufficiently punitive to dissuade them from doing so. Berlin would accuse

74 Volume II, Section IX, Chapter IX, footnote 10, page 311.

75 Page 23.

76 Page 24.

Helvétius of wanting to make robots out of men, but Helvétius would respond by arguing that such a thing is not possible, for men by nature must necessarily pursue what they perceive to be in their own best interests. No amount of education can “weed out” what is essentially human nature.

Finally Berlin opines, “Perhaps it [utilitarianism] can produce happiness; but it is not clear- it was not clear even in the eighteenth century, and certainly has not become clearer subsequently- that happiness is the sole value which men seek.”⁷⁷ Two points are to be made. First, Berlin admits that he may be wrong and that perhaps utilitarianism can produce happiness after all. Second, Berlin has once again offered a mischaracterisation, for Helvétius does not place happiness as the sole value that men seek, he places the pursuit of corporeal pleasure and the avoidance of corporeal pain as the sole or fundamental value from which all other values are necessarily derived. Men are happy if they feel corporeal pleasures and unhappy if they feel corporeal pains. Happiness is the residue of corporeal pleasure, and thus corporeal pleasure is the fundamental value. We are attracted to this value by a necessary principle of self-love. For example Helvétius writes, “The love of self produces the desire of happiness...”⁷⁸

IV

To conclude, we are of the opinion that most of the accusations levelled against Helvétius by Berlin are unfair. Many are unfounded, and based upon mischaracterisation rather than upon a well-researched and reasonable reading of the texts. Thus many are attacks directed against a straw-man. Further, Berlin at times rejects Helvétius specifically only on the grounds that he rejects utilitarianism generally, and because he supports libertarianism as a theory and considers it to be incompatible with utilitarianism. These are certainly not

⁷⁷ Page 27.

⁷⁸ Volume I, Section IV, Chapter XXII, page 353.

indefensible positions, but neither are they direct argument against the thinking of Helvétius specifically.

We share Berlin's concerns over the hidden method and secretiveness of what might be termed the social engineering program that Helvétius envisions. It is certainly incompatible with any acceptable definition of freedom or liberty, including those that Helvétius himself offers, to suggest that the masses should be slowly, imperceptibly and insensibly altered without their being made aware of the process. But this is precisely what Helvétius advocates, and as we have demonstrated he does so repeatedly and unabashedly. What Helvétius is proposing, it might be argued, is a covert paternalism, the imposition of a sort of collective indoctrination, a sort of mass conditioning of society without its consent or awareness. This secretive program is necessary for Helvétius because men are imbeciles. Helvétius also refers to men as apes. They need therefore to be saved from themselves. And Helvétius it might be contended appoints himself to do the saving. This is the deepest concern that Berlin expresses, and we have argued that he does so with full justification.

Is Helvétius the enemy that Isaiah Berlin makes him out to be? Or is Helvétius to be considered as a friend? Perhaps the answer is unclear, and opinions vary. Our hope is that we have facilitated readers to educatedly ponder the answers to these question for themselves. For the questions reach to the very heart of what it is to be human, and surely each one of us must be permitted the freedom to make our own choices in the absence of any kind of unseen guidance or coercion.