THE MENTOR PHILOSOPHERS

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THE 18TH CENTURY PHILOSOPHERS

THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

BASIC WRITINGS OF: Locke · Voltaire
Berkeley · Hume · Reid · Condillac
Hamann and others — Selected, with
Introduction and Commentary, by
Sir Isaiah Berlin

The Mentor Philosophers

THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

The 18th Century Philosophers

SELECTED, WITH INTRODUCTION AND INTERPRETIVE COMMENTARY

by

ISAIAH BERLIN

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SIR ISAIAH BERLIN, Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory, Oxford University, was educated at Corpus Christi College and has lived in Oxford during the last quarter of a century, except for the time of his service in Washington, D. C., during World War II. He has taught at Harvard University and Bryn Mawr College and has written widely on philosophical, historical and political subjects. His publications include a number of books, and numerous essays and articles in philosophical, historical and other periodicals. He is also the author of the Mentor book *The Hedgehog and The Fox.*

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TWELFTH PRINTING

MENTOR TRADEMARK REG. U.S. PAT. OFF. AND FOREIGN COUNTRIES
REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA
HECHO EN CHICAGO, U.S.A.

MENTOR BOOKS are published *in the United States* by
The New American Library, Inc.,
1301 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10019,
in Canada by The New American Library of Canada Limited,
295 King Street East, Toronto 2, Ontario,
in the United Kingdom by The New English Library Limited,
Barnard's Inn, Holborn, London, E.C. 1, England

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Acknowledgments

My thanks are due in the first place to Mr. Marcus Dick, Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford, for his most valuable assistance to me in preparing this volume. I should also like to thank Mr. Stuart Hampshire for his help in selecting texts.

In addition, I have to thank the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, for permission to quote from *Unity and Language, A Study in the Philosophy of Johann Georg Hamann,* by James C. O'Flaherty.

THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Introduction

PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS ARISE WHEN MEN ASK QUESTIONS of themselves or of others which, though very diverse, have certain characteristics in common. These questions tend to be very general, to involve issues of principle, and to have little or no concern with practical utility. But what is even more characteristic of them is that there seem to be no obvious and generally accepted procedures for answering them, nor any class of specialists to whom we automatically turn for the solutions. Indeed there is something peculiar about the questions themselves; those who ask them do not seem any too certain about what kind of answers they require, or indeed how to set about finding them. To give an illustration: if we ask "Have any ravens been seen in Iceland in 1955?" we know how to set about answering such a question—the correct answer must obviously be based on observation, and the naturalist is the expert to whom we can appeal. But when men ask questions like "Are there any material objects in the universe (or does it, perhaps, consist rather of minds and their states)?" what steps do we take to settle this? Yet outwardly there is a similarity between the two sentences. Or again, supposing I ask "Did the battle of Waterloo take place in the seventeenth century?" we know how to look for the relevant evidence, but what are we to do when asked "Did the universe have a beginning in time?" We know how to answer "Are you quite certain that he knows you?" But if someone wonders "Can I ever be quite certain about what goes on in the mind of another?" how do we satisfy him? It is easier to reply to "Why is Einstein's theory superior to Newton's?" than to "Why are the predictions of scientists more reliable than those of witch doctors (or vice versa)?", or to "How many positive roots are there of the equation $x^2 = 2$?" than to "Are there irrational

numbers?", or to "What is the exact meaning of the word 'obscurantist'?" than to "What is the exact meaning of the word 'if'?". "How should I mend this broken typewriter?" seems different in kind from "How should I (or men in general) live?"

In each case the attempt to answer the second question of the pair somehow seems to encounter an obstacle. There is not, as there is for the first member of the pair, a well-attested, generally accepted, method of discovering the solution. And yet questions of this kind seem definite enough, and have proved, to some men, very puzzling and indeed tormenting. Why, then, is there such difficulty in arriving at answers which settle the matter once and for all, so that the problems do not crop up afresh in each generation? This failure to provide definite solutions creates the impression that there is no progress in philosophy, merely subjective differences of opinion, with no objective criteria for the discovery of the truth.

The history of such questions, and of the means employed to provide the answers, is, in effect, the history of philosophy. The frame of ideas within which, and the methods by which, various thinkers at various times try to arrive at the truth about such issues—the very ways in which the questions themselves are construed—change under the influence of many forces, among them answers given by philosophers of an earlier age, the prevailing moral, religious and social beliefs of the period, the state of scientific knowledge, and, not least important, the methods used by the scientists of the time, especially if they have achieved spectacular successes, and have, therefore, bound their spell upon the imagination of their own and later generations.

One of the principal characteristics of such questions—and this seems to have become clearer only in our own day—is that, whatever else they may be, they are neither empirical nor formal. That is to say, philosophical questions cannot be answered by adducing the results of observation or experience, as empirical questions, whether of science or of common sense, are answered. Such questions as: "What is the supreme good?" Or "How can I be sure

that your sensations are similar to mine? Or that I ever genuinely understand what you are saying, and do not merely seem to myself to do so?" cannot be, on the face of it, answered by either of the two great instruments of human knowledge: empirical investigation on the one hand, and deductive reasoning as it is used in the formal disciplines on the other—the kind of argument which occurs, for example, in mathematics or logic or grammar.

Indeed it might almost be said that the history of philosophy in its relation to the sciences, consists, in part, in the disentangling of those questions which are either empirical (and inductive), or formal (and deductive), from the mass of problems which fill the minds of men, and the sorting out of these under the heads of the empirical or formal sciences concerned with them. It is in this way that, for instance, astronomy, mathematics, psychology, biology, etc., became divorced from the general corpus of philosophy (of which they once formed a part), and embarked upon fruitful careers of their own as independent disciplines. They remained within the province of philosophy only so long as the kinds of way in which their problems were to be settled remained unclear, and so were liable to be confused with other problems with which they had relatively little in common, and from which their differences had not been sufficiently discerned. The advance both of the sciences and of philosophy seems bound up with this progressive allocation of the empirical and formal elements, each to its own proper sphere; always, however, leaving behind a nucleus of unresolved (and largely unanalyzed) questions, whose generality, obscurity, and, above all, apparent (or real) insolubility by empirical or formal methods, gives them a status of their own which we tend to call philosophical.

Realization of this truth (if it be one) was a long time in arriving. The natural tendency was to regard philosophical questions as being on a level with other questions, and answerable by similar means; especially by means which had been successful in answering these other questions, which in fact did turn out to be either empirical or *a priori,* even though the distinction between the two was not always con-

sciously drawn. When some branch of human inquiry, say physics or biology, won notable successes by employing this or that new and fertile technique, an attempt was invariably made to apply analogous techniques to philosophical problems also, with results, fortunate and unfortunate, which are a permanent element in the history of human thought. Thus the unprecedented successes of the mathematical method in the seventeenth century left a mark on philosophy, not merely because mathematics had not clearly been discriminated from philosophy at this time, but because mathematical techniques—deduction from "self-evident" axioms according to fixed rules, tests of internal consistency, a priori methods, standards of clarity and rigor proper to mathematics—were applied to philosophy also; with the result that this particular model dominates the philosophy as well as the natural science of the period. This led to notable successes and equally notable failures, as the over-enthusiastic and fanatical application of techniques rich in results in one field, when mechanically applied to another, not necessarily similar to the first, commonly does. If the model that dominated the seventeenth century was mathematical, it is the mechanical model, more particularly that of the Newtonian system, that is everywhere imitated in the century that followed. Philosophical questions are in fact *sui generis,* and resemble questions of mechanics no more closely than those of mathematics (or of biology or psychology or history); nevertheless the effect upon philosophy of one model is very different from that of another; and it is this that forms a common characteristic of all the very different philosophers whose views are assembled in this volume.

The eighteenth century is perhaps the last period in the history of Western Europe when human omniscience was thought to be an attainable goal. The unparalleled progress of physics and mathematics in the previous century transformed the generally held view of the nature of the material world, and, still more, of the nature of true knowledge, to such a degree, that this epoch still stands like a barrier between us and the ages which preceded it, and makes the philosophical ideas of the Middle Ages, and even the

Renaissance, seem remote, fanciful and, at times, almost unintelligible. The application of mathematical techniques —and language—to the measurable properties of what the senses revealed, became the sole true method of discovery and of exposition. Descartes and Spinoza, Leibniz and Hobbes, all seek to give their reasoning a structure of a mathematical kind. What can be said must be statable in quasi-mathematical terms, for language less precise may turn out to conceal the fallacies and obscurities, the confused mass of superstitions and prejudices, which characterized the discredited theological or other forms of dogmatic doctrine about the universe, which the new science had come to sweep away and supersede. This mood persists into the eighteenth century, with Newton's influence as the strongest single factor. Newton had performed the unprecedented task of explaining the material world, that is, of making it possible, by means of relatively few fundamental laws of immense scope and power, to determine, at least in principle, the properties and behavior of every particle of every material body in the universe, and that with a degree of precision and simplicity undreamt of before. Order and clarity now reigned in the realm of physical science:

> Nature and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night:
> God said, Let Newton be! and all was Light!

Yet the ancient disciplines of metaphysics, logic, ethics, and all that related to the social life of men, still lay in chaos, governed by the confusions of thought and language of an earlier and unregenerate age. It was natural, and indeed almost inevitable, that those who had been liberated by the new sciences should seek to apply their methods and principles to a subject which was clearly in even more desperate need of order than the facts of the external world. Indeed this task was of crucial importance: for without a true and clear picture of the principal "faculties" and operations of the human mind, one could not be certain how much credence to give to various types of thought or reasoning, nor how to determine the sources and limits of human knowledge, nor the relationships between its varieties. But unless this was known the claims of ignoramuses