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1

Introduction

By common consent, we are entering a new phase in human history. Thanks to globalization brought about by revolutionary changes in the means of transport and communication and expansionist capitalism, far-flung societies are increasingly being locked into a system of interdependence.¹ They face common problems such as regulating the movement of capital and people, climate change, the environment, the spread of disease and terrorism, which require collective solutions. And their interests are intertwined to the extent that events in one country can have profound consequences in others thousands of miles away. The global reach of the media brings to us vivid images of the struggles and suffering of men and women in distant parts of the world, involves us in their lives, heightens our sense of shared humanity, and demands a response. As different societies come together, there is a deepening of diversity between and within them, and we need to find ways of coping with its challenges at both the domestic and the international level.

Globalization also challenges traditional identities, be they ethnic, cultural, religious or national. And as these come under pressure, personal identity too cannot remain stable.² Although the state remains important in the lives of its citizens, it is subject to unprecedented pressures from above and below, raising acute questions about the nature and basis of the national identity on which it has traditionally relied to maintain its unity and stability. Cultural communities are constantly exposed to, and having to change in response to, each other, and can no longer define and maintain their identities as they did before. As generally happens in times of great change, people turn to religion for moral certainty, meaning, stability and principles of individual and collective life. Being required to meet new and sometimes unusual demands, and to operate in a new historical context, religion too undergoes important

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changes, faces a crisis of identity, and takes new and sometimes perverse forms. With these and other changes taking place all around them, and in the institutions in terms of which human beings generally define themselves, the perplexed individuals face the agonizing question of how to organize their lives and define and construct their identities.

If we are to comprehend and respond to the challenges of our age, we need to rethink our traditional assumptions, categories and even questions. Some interesting work is being done in this area, and this book is intended as a modest contribution to it. Like the joke about the tenth speaker at a meeting, I know that everything that needs to be said has been said before, but not everyone has said it! The book is basically concerned to explore the changing nature of different kinds of identity and the political principles that should guide human relations within and between societies. One of my main concerns is to argue that we need to approach our problems in the spirit of human solidarity, and that this requires us to energize and consolidate our shared humanity, or what I call our human identity. Identity politics has so far been defined and conducted in terms of particular collective identities, such as those based on gender, ethnicity and nationality. While this is important, it is just as crucial to affirm our universal human identity, locate particular identities within its framework, and engage in what I call a new politics of identity.

In taking this view, I differ from both the particularists, who think and live within the limited horizon of whatever particular identity or identities they consider central; and the cosmopolitans or abstract universalists, for whom these are all prisons and the only goal worth striving for is an unmediated unity of the individual and the human race as a whole. Hegel is closer to the truth when he argues that the two identities are dialectically related, and that one does not reach the universal in a single leap, but climbs up to it through a series of mediating stages. As Hegel shows, each is incomplete and needs and points to the other as its necessary complement. His profound insight, however, is distorted by his absolutist metaphysics and idealist epistemology, which lead him to think respectively that all identities form part of a harmonious hierarchical whole, and that the conflicts between them arise only from our inadequate understanding of them, and not from the wider socio-political context within which they are defined and located, a point made by Karl Marx with great effect.³

Human beings are the bearers of both universal and particular identities. They share common humanity or human identity and are also

fathers, mothers, sons, daughters and spouses as well as members of different ethnic, cultural, political and other communities. As sharers of human identity, they are morally equal and make certain claims on each other. As the bearers of particular identities, they are related to some individuals by varying degrees of special ties. While some of these ties and the identities associated with them are relatively marginal, others are central. They give depth and meaning to their lives as well as a sense of rootedness and belonging, and their lives would be unliveable without them.

Our common human identity and particular identities, and the concomitant moralities of impartiality and partiality, are the inescapable and central facts of our life, and need to be integrated in a coherent framework. The human identity remains abstract unless it is anchored in and enriched by our particular identities. The latter, in turn, are embedded in – indeed made possible by – and nurtured and limited by our shared humanity. We are not homogeneous instantiations or specimens of the human species. We are French or American, Hindu or Christian, mothers or fathers, and thus human in our own mediated and unique ways. And we are all these because we have certain distinctive capacities and needs by virtue of being human. We attain glimpses of our universal identity not by abstracting our various differences, but rather by comprehending imaginatively distant millions in their uniqueness, and thus as beings who are at once both similar and different, or rather similar by virtue of being different.

Global interdependence requires us to act in the spirit of human solidarity and activate our human identity. We are also, however, members of different political, cultural and other communities. Since these are rich sources of moral energy and mean a great deal to us, human solidarity cannot be constructed on their ashes or behind their backs. Instead, we should respect these identities but redefine and restructure them in the light of, and bring them into harmony with, the universal human identity. The two are then no longer conflictual but complementary. Particularity or difference is valued, but not particularism, which absolutizes it. The universal is valued, but not universalism, at least not of the kind that sets itself in opposition to and despises the particular.

This broad approach underpins and is developed in greater detail in the following chapters. To avoid misunderstanding, I am not interested in examining the causes, agents and future forms of globalization, or in whether it is irreversible and how to use it for emancipatory rather than hegemonic purposes, as at present, but rather in exploring the nature of

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global interdependence and the best way to respond to its moral and political challenges.

In Chapter 2 I analyse the concept of identity, and argue that it involves identifying oneself *as* a particular kind of person and, when appropriate, *with* others of that kind. The individual identity, I suggest, has three dimensions: the personal; the social; and the human. The first identifies an individual as a unique person; the second as a member of a particular group or structure of relationship; and the third as a member of the universal human community. The three are closely related, and I explore their connections. In Chapter 3 I concentrate on collective identities, an important subset of social identities, and examine the way in which they are constructed and contested. Collective identities have their strengths and dangers, and I explore how we can benefit from the former while avoiding the latter. In their search for recognition, collective identities challenge and seek to redefine the prevailing norms that marginalize them. Since the resulting politics of recognition can become culturally obsessed, it has rightly been subjected to criticism by the redistributionists. I examine these criticisms and conclude that, when properly understood, the two politics are complementary.

In Chapter 4 I turn to national identity, one of the most dominant forms of collective identity, and explore its nature and internal logic, the reasons why it has become an important part of individual identity, and the kinds of debates it generates when it appears to be under threat. I argue that it is neither given nor a matter of unfettered choice, but is critically constructed out of the inherited structure of beliefs and practices in the light of current circumstances and hopes for the future. National identity raises difficult issues in multicultural societies, which is the theme of Chapter 5. Since different kinds of cultural diversity raise different problems, I concentrate on immigrants, the archetypal strangers, and argue that their successful 'integration' requires appropriate redefinitions of their own and the receiving society's identity. Since many contemporary societies, especially those in Europe, have defined themselves traditionally as nation states, they feel threatened, in a way that the US does not, by deep diversity, particularly that represented by their Muslim immigrants. In Chapter 6 I explore how they can cope with it and argue that, although they are right to be worried about a deeply alienated, small but significant Muslim youth, the bulk of their Muslim population has adjusted reasonably well.

In almost all contemporary societies, religion has acquired considerable salience. Faced with massive changes in their ways of life and

fearful of losing their sense of identity, large groups of people in Western and non-Western societies are turning to religion to give them moral stability. This has taken particularly strident forms in some, though by no means all, Muslim societies, especially those with a weak secular culture and poorly developed political and economic institutions. They expect religion to play the role of a secular ideology, and use it to transform society. In Chapter 7 I show why this happens, and with what disastrous results.

Cultural diversity at the global level can become a source of acute conflict if it is not understood properly and related to wider economic, political and other factors. Samuel Huntington (1996) argues that Islam resents the West's power and values, and that a clash between the two is inescapable. In Chapter 8 I critically examine this view, and argue that it is deeply flawed. A dialogue between societies at economic, political and other levels is the only way to deal with their conflicts. The dialogue, however, is not easy, has its limits, and to expect more of it than it can deliver is to invite disappointment. While fostering the necessary conditions for it, we need to devise ways to contain and manage possible clashes.

In Chapter 9 I take a closer look at the impact of globalization on local cultures, and reject the two opposite views that it leads to homogenization and even Americanization, and to resistance and fragmentation. By and large, cultural communities have considerable resilience and ingenuity, and cope with external influences by reconstituting themselves. While some occasionally panic and turn inward, they too, consciously or unconsciously, absorb a good many global influences, partly as a very condition of their survival and partly because of their inherent appeal. The overall result is neither homogenization nor fragmentation but more complex, rather like a conversation between the speakers of different languages who nevertheless share part of their vocabulary, and are pleased to encounter small but growing passages of lucidity in the midst of large areas of incomprehension.

In the remaining four chapters (Chapters 10–13) I cast the net wider and address the moral and political questions raised by global interdependence. Since it requires collective action and some concern for the interests of others, we need a global ethics to guide our choices and forms of relationship. I discuss the nature, basis and contents of such an ethics in Chapter 10. Since our common humanity cannot be detached from our special relations with some individuals and communities, a tension arises between their claims and those of human beings in

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general, between the moralities of partiality and impartiality. Chapter 11 explores their tension and ways of reducing it. Chapter 12 explores the political implications of the view I develop in the two preceding chapters, and makes a case for globally orientated citizenship, showing how we should balance the claims of our fellow citizens and wider humankind. I argue that our duties to our fellow human beings could involve humanitarian intervention in certain circumstances. This raises the complex question of whether we have a duty to promote democracy in highly repressive societies. In the last chapter I argue that we *do*, provided that certain conditions are met. Since this chapter highlights the basic concerns of the book, it is a good place to end or, as the optimists say, to ‘conclude’ it.

A few words about the general orientation of the book might be helpful. I have long believed that philosophy benefits greatly from close familiarity with its subject matter.⁴ Moral philosophy would be infinitely poorer, lack internal checks, and might not even get off the ground if moral philosophers did not regularly face moral dilemmas, make moral decisions and know what it was to act morally. This is just as true of political philosophy, perhaps even more so, because we are citizens, vote in elections, read daily newspapers, and think that we know political life as well as we should, when in fact it is often quite complex. Activists or those fighting against injustice have their blind spots, but they discover aspects of political life and understand the complex mechanisms of power and domination that others do not.

This book was begun when I was appointed to the House of Lords, and carries the traces of its context. I found myself asking what political philosophy has to contribute to the understanding and conduct of political life, and what insights and skills, if any, I brought to the deliberations on the great issues of the day that others did not. This was brought home to me rather sharply during conversations with several distinguished public figures in Britain and abroad. They said they expected political philosophers to be ‘thoughtful and reflective persons’ saying ‘something important about the world’, but generally found them to be interested only in each other or in ‘abstract and trivial’ questions. They got little out of the philosophers’ writings about how to deal with the sorry state of the world and address such serious issues as whether or not to go to war to topple a tyrant, or ask their countrymen to make sacrifices to alleviate poverty and injustice in other parts of the world, how to respond to ‘terrorists’, whether to allow religion a valued public role, respect the claims of all manner of identity groups, and promote greater

equality within and between societies. My usual reply that political philosophers did not meet their flattering description, that their job was to understand the world and not to prescribe or preach, and that they had no special expertise in handling practical political issues cut little ice with them. If the understanding did not lead to illumination and give at least some helpful general perspective on political life, it was, in the public figures' view, 'pointless' and 'self-indulgent'.

They are mistaken, but they do raise an important question about the nature and aims of political philosophy. Although this is not the place to answer it at length, it seems to me that while political philosophy has its own intellectual and moral discipline and mode of working, it needs, at least from time to time, to take its bearings from concrete issues and test itself against them. This does not at all mean that it should aim to guide the world or pontificate on day-to-day issues. If it ever entertained such a hubristic ambition, it would bring itself into ridicule. It does, however, make a significant contribution to political life by clarifying issues, analysing the language in which they are framed, exposing specious arguments and offering better ones, examining and criticizing the political principles in terms of which political actors take and defend their decisions, and articulating a historically relevant and possible vision of a good society. The challenge before it is how to engage with the great issues of the day without betraying its intellectual integrity and rigour.

This book is an attempt to chart this terrain. It is written at the interface of the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. Its intended audience is both fellow political philosophers and politically concerned individuals. The obvious danger is that it either falls down the cracks between the two and interests neither, or is much more of one than the other and interests one while alienating the other. I hope that, by and large, it strikes a reasonable balance. Even if it does not, it should, I hope, inspire better minds to explore how political philosophy should be practised so that it does justice to both its equally important halves, and in which politics does not merely supply the raw material but also shapes the appropriate mode of philosophizing it.⁵

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