

A portrait of Isaiah Berlin, an older man with glasses, wearing a dark suit and tie. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. His hands are clasped in front of him. The background is a warm, textured orange-red color.

John Gray

Isaiah Berlin

An Interpretation of His Thought

With a new introduction
by the author

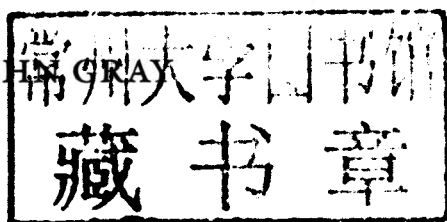
ISAIAH BERLIN

AN INTERPRETATION OF HIS THOUGHT



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Isaiah Berlin

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John Gray

Jesus College, Oxford

July 1994

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INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

I

In the last conversation I had with him before he died, I asked Isaiah Berlin if there was one author who more than any other had shaped his way of thinking. Without a moment's hesitation, he replied, 'Herzen.' I was not surprised by Berlin's response. His writings are full of admiring references to the nineteenth-century Russian radical author, and there are many parallels between Berlin's attitudes and those he found in Alexander Herzen. In the Introduction he contributed to an edition of Herzen's memoirs, *My Past and Thoughts*, Berlin wrote: 'Like the more extreme of the left wing disciples of Hegel, in particular like the anarchist Max Stirner, Herzen saw danger in the great magnificent abstractions the mere sound of which precipitated men into violent and meaningless slaughter—new idols, it seemed to him, on whose altar human blood was to be shed tomorrow as irrationally and uselessly as the blood of the victims of yesterday or the day before, sacrificed in honour of older divinities—church or monarchy or the feudal order or the sacred customs of the tribe, that were now discredited as obstacles to the progress of mankind.'¹

Much of Berlin's work can be read as an exercise in demystifying these magnificent abstractions—not in order to argue that they are hollow or meaningless but instead to show that they contain, or more often conceal, fundamental conflicts among human values. Uncovering the moral conflicts that are hidden in our most cherished ideals was a major part of Berlin's life work. The method he adopted to reveal these conflicts involved a kind

of analysis; but not the type that prevailed in Oxford when he returned to being a tutor in philosophy at New College after the Second World War. Though he produced a number of papers in the style of analytical philosophy and admired the clarity of thinking he observed in some of the chief practitioners of the school, Berlin was not following their lead when he examined moral and political ideas. The intellectual path in which he was travelling was not that of his Oxford contemporaries or any variety of Anglo-American philosophy. When, following Berlin's response to my question about which thinker had most formed his thinking, I asked, 'Not Hume, or John Stuart Mill?' he replied, again without hesitation and quite firmly, 'No, Herzen.'

II

It is widely believed that Berlin gave up philosophy when he returned to Oxford and turned instead to intellectual history. This common story is supported by Berlin's testimony. Writing in the introduction to a collection of his philosophical essays, Berlin recounts

a conversation I had with the late Professor H. M. Sheffer of Harvard, whom I met there towards the end of the war when I was working at the British Embassy in Washington. Sheffer, one of the most eminent mathematical logicians of his day, said to me that in his opinion there were only two philosophical disciplines in which one could hope for an increase of permanent knowledge: one was logic, in which new discoveries and techniques superseded old ones—this was a field in which genuine progress occurred, as it did in the natural sciences or mathematics; the other was psychology, which he thought of as being in some respects still philosophical—this was an empirical study and obviously capable of steady development. . . . In the months that followed, I asked myself whether I wished to devote the rest of my life to a study,

however fascinating and important in itself, which, transforming as its achievements undoubtedly were, would not, any more than criticism or poetry, add to the store of positive human knowledge. I gradually came to the conclusion that I should prefer a field in which one could hope to know more at the end of one's life than when one had begun, and so I left philosophy for the field of the history of ideas, which had for many years been of absorbing interest to me.²

Berlin's account hardly captures all of the reasons why he 'left philosophy'. More to the point, it omits those that were most important in shaping his later work. He used to say that he gave it up because he was not clever enough to make any important contribution to logic—a characteristically self-deprecating assessment that need not be taken too seriously. Certainly Berlin was dissatisfied with philosophy as it was practised in Britain during the years after the war. When he came back from his work in Washington he had no intention, he said more than once, of becoming 'an ordinary Oxford philosopher'. Much of what was being done under the heading of philosophy at the time he found unenlightening and uninspiring. A less diplomatic way of describing his reasons for leaving that kind of philosophy behind would be to say that he found it boring—narrow in scope and lacking in human relevance. But there was a more fundamental reason, I believe, why Berlin shifted to intellectual history, which had to do with philosophical method and with aspects of his Russian intellectual inheritance.

It was not chiefly because philosophy had no prospect of replicating the kind of labour-progressive increase in human knowledge achieved in other branches of inquiry that Berlin took up the history of ideas. After all, the work he went on to do in intellectual history could no more claim to increase the store of positive human knowledge than could the type of philosophy that he had given up. He did little primary research on the thinkers about whom he wrote; where his view of them is arrestingly fresh, it is

not because he has new facts to present. It was a new way of reading these thinkers that he offered, in which they could be seen as illustrating a view of human life that had been pushed to the margins of Western thought. When Berlin engaged with the history of ideas it was not because he had given up philosophy. He continued to do philosophy, but in a different way.

During the post-war period, Anglo-American philosophy was a thoroughly unhistorical discipline (as it remains today). Much engaged with what was described as ‘conceptual analysis’, it treated moral and political ideas as if they had no history, or at any rate none that was relevant to philosophical inquiry. The few who believed that history was integral to philosophy, such as the Oxford philosopher of art and historian of Roman Britain R. G. Collingwood (1889–1943), were isolated figures with little influence. Yet there can be no doubt that Collingwood had a major impact on Berlin. He attended Collingwood’s lectures on the philosophy of history in 1931, and it was there (according to Berlin’s editor and literary executor Dr Henry Hardy) that Berlin first heard the quotation from Kant that would become one of his mottos: ‘Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made’.

More importantly, Berlin came to deploy in his work what Collingwood described as ‘absolute presuppositions’—fundamental postulates or premises, which change over time while shaping thinking so long as they remain in place. Collingwood was clear that these premises are not empirical generalisations, or laws of nature of the sort that scientists try to formulate. Rather, like the categories or ‘forms of understanding’ of Immanuel Kant, they structured our experience of the world and for that reason may be described as metaphysical rather than empirical in nature. But unlike Kant, Collingwood believed the categories that structured human thinking were not fixed; they changed along with changes in ways of living—a view he shared with Hegel (and later Marx). Metaphysics, Collingwood believed, was an historical

discipline and so too, Berlin came to think, was moral and political philosophy. Berlin's interpretations of Romanticism and the Enlightenment apply this historical method, as does his account of positive and negative liberty. Understanding this method helps in unravelling Berlin's ambiguous relations with the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment and his views on pluralism and relativism in ethics. At the same time, understanding why Berlin opted to pursue philosophy through the medium of the history of ideas discloses what is most original in his view of liberty and helps define his highly distinctive version of liberalism.

III

Nothing in the extensive literature on Berlin that has accumulated during the eighteen years since the first edition of this book was published leads me to retract the book's central thesis: there is no compelling argument from the value-pluralist claim that fundamental human values are at odds with one another to the liberal ideal according to which freedom of choice is the supreme political good.³ At the same time I have come to think that this is not as much of a problem for Berlin as I may have believed. As a result of Henry Hardy's work, much more of Berlin's corpus of writings has been published since I wrote this book, including some illuminating letters. Reading these writings, I have come to think that it a mistake to judge Berlin's thought by the standards of any liberal orthodoxy.

Though pluralism in ethics and liberalism in politics may be connected in a number of ways, none of these linkages can secure the universal primacy of the value of liberty that Berlin at times asserted. Even so, there is a deeper consistency in Berlin's work that is lost when it is assessed as attempting to mount a watertight defence of a doctrinal form of liberalism. What Berlin plausibly argues is that value-pluralism can be used to support a moral minimum, precarious, shifting and ridden with conflicts, which has

priority over any political ideal. If we read him in this way, which is consistent with much of his work, Berlin is not so much a theorist of liberty as a philosopher of human decency.

IV

To be sure, there are unresolved tensions in Berlin's thinking. The robustly empirical criticism he makes of the metaphysical assumptions underlying influential positive views of freedom is hard to reconcile with the metaphysical view he himself sometimes adopts of humans as creating themselves through their choices. Tensions of this kind originate in the disparate currents of thought to which Berlin was exposed: Oxford philosophy before and after the Second World War and Berlin's equivocal and in some ways highly critical response to it; his dissatisfaction with the prevailing versions of liberal theory and the continuing appeal to him of a peculiarly Russian variant of nineteenth-century liberalism; and the changing interplay between the British, Jewish and Russian facets of his moral and intellectual inheritance.

Exploring these interactions may be useful in dislodging some entrenched stereotypes of Berlin and his work. It is easier now than it was eighteen years ago to see that he was never primarily a 'Cold War thinker'. By the same token, it is clearer now than it was during Berlin's lifetime that the philosophy he promoted makes a contribution to moral and political reflection of enduring value—not least because the questions it asks remain as urgent today as they have ever been.

V

For most people today, liberalism is a package deal in which freedom and democracy go together. In contrast, Berlin insists that liberty or freedom—following Berlin, I use these terms inter-

changeably—is one thing, democracy another: ‘Just as a democracy may, in fact, deprive the individual citizen of a great many liberties which he might have in some other form of society, so,’ Berlin writes in *Two Concepts of Liberty*, ‘it is perfectly conceivable that a liberal-minded despot would allow his subjects a large measure of personal freedom.’ That a greater measure of liberty may exist in some authoritarian regimes than in some democracies is not for Berlin just a logical possibility, however. It is also a fact of history: ‘Indeed, it is arguable that in the Prussia of Frederick the Great or in the Austria of Joseph II men of imagination, originality and creative genius, and, indeed, minorities of all kinds, were less persecuted and felt the pressure, both of institutions and custom, less heavy upon them than in many an earlier or later democracy.’⁴

This view has become distinctly unfashionable, because it implies—what in some contexts has unquestionably been the case—that individual liberty may be better protected by authoritarian, imperial or colonial regimes than in conditions of self-government. Berlin’s view is not only unfashionable; it is also highly topical. In a time that has featured several attempts at ‘regime change’, the fact that liberty and democracy are two things not one, and in some circumstances might actually be at odds, has an importance that is far from being merely academic. Those who supported the overthrow of Saddam’s tyranny in Iraq did so, at least in part, because they took for granted that greater liberty would result—an assumption that was logically and historically groundless. It cannot be denied that the regime that has emerged in Iraq since the American-led invasion is more democratic than the one that preceded it: the government of the day is chosen by a process that includes elections, the results of which may be unpredictable. But it is also undeniable that many minorities—religious minorities such as Christians and lifestyle minorities such as gays—are less free than they were under Saddam’s despotic rule, while the freedom of the half of the population that is made up of women has been much diminished.

There is nothing in the move from tyranny to democracy that is bound to expand individual freedom. If those who supported regime change imagined otherwise, they must have forgotten, or never known, this truth, which Berlin and earlier generations of liberal thinkers spent much of their lives trying to communicate.

VI

In insisting that democracy and liberty can be rivals, Berlin belongs in a distinguished tradition. The French liberal thinker Benjamin Constant (1767–1830), the British liberal Utilitarian John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) and Mill's godson, the philosopher and liberal reformer Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), thought the same. These thinkers took for granted what Berlin found it necessary to argue: liberty is best understood in negative terms, as an absence of constraint or interference, legal or social, on what individuals may do. A large academic literature has been produced criticising the distinction between negative and positive liberty that Berlin posited, and it is true that he was not always clear or consistent in what he wrote on the subject. But it seems to me that he was nonetheless essentially right: freedom is best understood as the absence of human obstacles to living as you wish, or may come to wish.

This is not because there is anything like a 'concept' of freedom that Berlin was claiming to have 'analysed'. He did not need reminding that the meaning of freedom has long been contested. The title of his celebrated lecture referred to two ideas of freedom, not one. "Positive" liberty, conceived as the answer to the question, "By whom am I to be governed", he wrote, 'is a valid universal goal.'⁵ When Berlin proposed that we should think of freedom in negative terms, he was arguing in favour of adopting the negative view: we should think of freedom as meaning the liberty to live in many different kinds of way; and we should be clear that

this freedom can be blocked and invaded, not only by autocrats and despots, but also by majorities and democracies. Positive freedom is in Berlin's view a bona fide view of freedom. He still argues that we should prefer the negative view, for in its most influential forms the positive view has blurred the distinction between being free to live as you wish and living a good or rational life.

As he put it in a BBC radio broadcast on Hegel in 1952, part of a series collected fifty years later as *Freedom and Its Betrayal*:

There have always been people who have wanted to be secure in some tight establishment, to find their rightful secure place in some rigid system, rather than to be free. To such people Hegel has a word of comfort. Nevertheless, fundamentally this is a vast confusion, a historically fatal identification of liberty, as we understand it, with security. . . . The essence of liberty has always lain in the ability to choose as you wish to choose, because you wish so to choose, uncoerced, unbullied, not swallowed up in some vast system, and in the right to resist, to be unpopular, to stand up for your convictions merely because they are your convictions. This is true freedom, and without it there is neither freedom of any kind, nor even the illusion of it.⁶

Like Constant, Berlin believed the negative view of liberty became a distinct political ideal only in modern times. Negative freedom is 'true' freedom because it best captures what makes freedom valuable, which is the opportunity it secures to live as you choose.⁷ In the forms in which it has been most widely promoted positive freedom fails to do this, since what it protects is the ability to live according to some privileged conception of life. At its simplest, Berlin's rejection of positive freedom is a rejection of paternalism—the idea that some authority, in possession of a divine revelation or having a higher level of knowledge or enlightenment, is qualified to prescribe how others may live. But Berlin's rejection of paternalism was more than the expression of a temperamental antipathy to the bullying pretensions of moral

authorities, religious or secular, strong though that antipathy was in him. His anti-paternalism was rooted in his pluralist view of the good, and it is this pluralism—more than his insistence that freedom and democracy can be rivals, which he has in common with earlier liberal thinkers—that makes his defence of negative freedom fresh and original.

VII

Roughly stated, value-pluralism is the theory that human values are irreducibly multiple and in some cases generate conflicts that have no single right solution. As an ethical theory value-pluralism denies what both Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics assert—that there is, at least in principle, a satisfactory answer to every moral dilemma, whether by having the best consequences, or by obeying some ethical principle. For these theories, there are no moral tragedies: no dilemmas in which wrong is done however we act.

In conversation Berlin mentioned an actual case that illustrated why he believed these theories were deficient. During the Second World War, a government official told the secretaries in his office that he was going to do an extremely unjust thing: sack them all, knowing that only one of them was guilty of any misdeed. A leak had been discovered; someone was passing sensitive information to the enemy. Efforts to identify the individual who was the source of the leaks had failed. Meanwhile, brave men and women were going to their deaths at the enemy's hands and Britain's war effort was being hampered. In these circumstances, the official said, he had decided to eliminate the possibility of further leaks by firing the entire team. He knew it was a grave step. None of those who were fired would again have a job in government service; there would be a shadow over their lives ever after. Nevertheless, the official concluded, it was the right thing to do.

While Berlin agreed that what the official did was right—as I do myself—he did not claim that it was the only right response