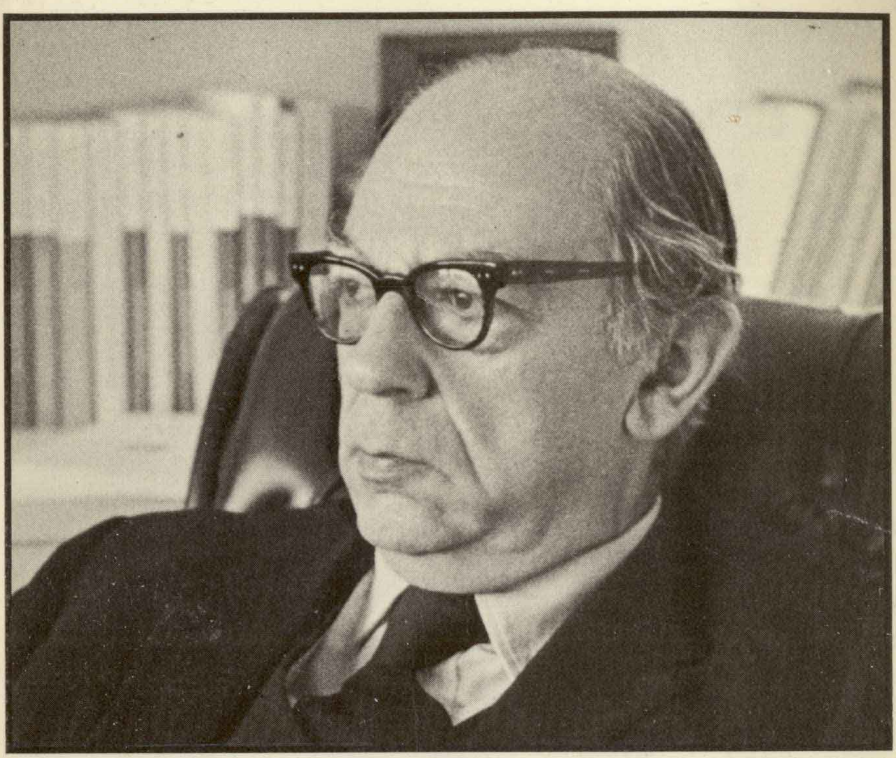
Against the Current

Essays in the History of Ideas

With an introduction by Roger Hausheer



ISAIAH BERLIN

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ESSAYS IN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

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With an Introduction by
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Oxford Toronto Melbourne
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1981

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
London Glasgow New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Wellington
and associate companies in
Beirut Berlin Ibadan Mexico City

First published by the Hogarth Press Ltd 1979
First published as an Oxford University Press paperback 1981

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Berlin, Isaiah
Selected writings. — (Oxford paperbacks).
Vol. 3: Against the current
1. Philosophy
I. Title II. Hardy, Henry
III. Against the current
192 B29 80–41843
ISBN 0–19–283028–7

Printed in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading

Author's Note

I have nothing of my own to add to the essays on the history of ideas contained in this book, but I should be exceedingly remiss if I did not take this opportunity of offering my thanks to Mr Roger Hausheer for providing so sympathetic and luminous an account of my views on the topics discussed in these essays. No author could wish for a more understanding, scrupulous or civilised critic. I should like to express my sincere thanks to this most promising young scholar.

ISAIAH BERLIN

September 1978

Editor's Preface

This is the third[1] of four volumes in which I have brought together, and prepared for reprinting, most of the essays so far published by Isaiah Berlin which had not hitherto been made available in a collected form. His many writings were scattered, often in obscure places, most were out of print, and only half a dozen essays had previously been collected and reissued.[2] These four volumes, together with a complete bibliography of what he has published to date, reprinted in the present volume,[3] will make much more of his work readily accessible than before. This it clearly deserves.

A few passages – chiefly translations – have been rewritten by the author for this collection. Otherwise, apart from necessary corrections, and the addition of missing references, the essays are reprinted in their original form.

The essays in the present volume are contributions to the history of ideas. For various reasons, I have omitted nine essays in this field which, other things being equal, would have belonged here. These are 'Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century' and 'John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life', which have already been reissued in *Four Essays on Liberty*; 'The Philosophical Ideas of Giambattista Vico' and 'Herder and Enlightenment', which have been revised and published as a book, *Vico and Herder*; 'Socialism and Socialist Theories', which is written for a purpose and in a style which confines it to its encyclopedic context; 'European Unity and Its Vicissitudes' and 'L'apoteosi della volontà romantica: la rivolta contro il tipo di un mondo ideale', whose contents are due to be absorbed into the author's projected book on the intellectual origins of romanticism; 'The Bent

[1] The first was *Russian Thinkers* (London and New York, 1978); the second *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* (London, 1978; New York, 1979).

[2] *Four Essays on Liberty* (London and New York, 1969) and *Vico and Herder* (London and New York, 1976). Other collections have appeared only in translation.

[3] See pp. 356–73 below.

Twig: A Note on Nationalism', which by and large covers the same ground as an essay on the same topic reprinted here, 'Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power'; and 'Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West', which the author wished to use elsewhere. Details of these pieces can be found in the bibliography already mentioned.[1]

The details of the original publication of the essays that are included here are as follows. 'The Counter-Enlightenment' appeared in the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York, 1968–73: Scribner's);[2] 'The Originality of Machiavelli' was published in Myron P. Gilmore (ed.), *Studies on Machiavelli* (Florence, 1972: Sansoni); 'The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities' was the second Tykociner Memorial Lecture, published by the University of Illinois in 1974; 'Vico's Concept of Knowledge' appeared as 'A Note on Vico's Concept of Knowledge' in Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Hayden V. White (eds), *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium* (Baltimore, 1969: Johns Hopkins Press); 'Vico and the Ideal of the Enlightenment' was published in *Social Research* 43 (1976);[3] 'Montesquieu' appeared in the *Proceedings of the British Academy* 41 (1955); 'Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism' was a contribution to G. P. Morice (ed.), *David Hume: Bicentennial Papers* (Edinburgh, 1977: Edinburgh University Press);[4] 'Herzen and his Memoirs' is the introduction to Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, translated by Constance Garnett (London, 1968: Chatto and Windus; New York, 1968: Knopf); 'The Life and Opinions of Moses Hess' was the Lucien Wolf Memorial Lecture (Cambridge, 1959: Heffer, for the Jewish Historical Society of England); 'Benjamin Disraeli, Karl Marx and the Search for Identity' appeared in *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England 22 (1968–9)* (London, 1970: Jewish Historical Society of England); 'The "*Naïveté*" of Verdi' was published in *Atti del I Congresso internazionale di studi verdiani, 1966* (Parma, 1969: Istituto di Studi Verdiani); 'Georges Sorel' was a Creighton Lecture published first in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 31 December 1971, and then in an expanded

[1] They are, respectively, items 37, 74, 79, 98, 38, 73, 143, 128 and 159. The bibliography should also be consulted for the many smaller pieces in this area, including book reviews.

[2] With a bibliography not here reproduced.

[3] Its last section, 'The Workings of Providence', is not reprinted here.

[4] The 'Additional Bibliographical Material' appended to this article has not been reproduced here.

form in Chimen Abramsky (ed.), *Essays in Honour of E. H. Carr* (London, 1974: Macmillan); and 'Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power' appeared in *Partisan Review* 45 (1978). I am grateful to the publishers concerned for allowing me to reprint these essays. 'The Counter-Enlightenment', 'The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities' and 'Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power' have been left without references (with the exception of passages quoted in footnotes and one long passage), as they originally appeared. Translations, unless otherwise stated, are by Isaiah Berlin. My 'A Bibliography of Isaiah Berlin' first appeared in *Lycidas* (the magazine of Wolfson College, Oxford) No 3 (1975) – additions and corrections ibid. No 4 (1976) – and has been revised and updated for inclusion here.

I have received very generous help from a number of people in editing this volume. Roger Hausheer has not only written the introduction, but has helped extensively with German sources, especially Hamann and Hess, and has read the proofs. David Robey has helped with Machiavelli, Edward Larrissy with Blake, Robert Shackleton with Montesquieu, Robert Wokler with Rousseau, Barry Stroud with Hume, Aileen Kelly with Herzen, Lord Blake and Vernon Bogdanor with Disraeli, Terrell Carver with Marx, and Jeremy Jennings with Sorel. I could not have managed without the assistance of these scholars, and I record my great gratitude to them. Isaiah Berlin continues, with undiminished courtesy, to do his best to answer my virtually endless queries, and Pat Utechin, his secretary, has again provided invaluable help and support. Finally I should like to thank Anne Wilkinson and Jim Hardy for their kindness in reading the proofs.

HENRY HARDY

February 1979

Note to the Paperback Edition

Since I wrote the above Preface, the final volume of *Selected Writings* has been published in hardback – *Personal Impressions* (London, 1980; New York, 1981) – and paperback editions have appeared of the first two volumes, *Russian Thinkers* (Harmondsworth and New York, 1980) and *Concepts and Categories* (Oxford, 1980; New York, 1981).

A number of minor corrections have been made in this new impression of *Against the Current*, in addition to those already made in the second impression of the Hogarth Press edition; I should like to thank Keith Thomas for drawing to my attention some of the errors thereby removed. I have also updated the bibliography of Isaiah Berlin's writings at the end of the book.

H.H.

November 1980

Introduction

Roger Hausheer

> Two extravagances: to exclude Reason, to admit only Reason.
>
> Blaise Pascal

> A man of clear ideas errs grievously if he imagines that whatever is seen confusedly does not exist: it belongs to him, when he meets with such a thing, to dispel the mist, and fix the outlines of the vague form which is looming through it.
>
> J. S. Mill

> In our time, what is at issue is the very nature of man, the image we have of his limits and possibilities as man. History is not yet done with its exploration of the limits and meanings of 'human nature'.
>
> C. Wright Mills

I

Isaiah Berlin's essays in the history of ideas are not written from a point of view. They are not intended directly to illustrate or support (or for that matter attack or undermine) any single historical or political theory, doctrine or ideology; they range from such wholly diverse figures as Marx, Disraeli and Sorel to topics as apparently remote from one another as nationalism and the theory of knowledge; they are wholly exploratory and undogmatic, raising more tentative but often deeply unsettling questions than they claim to answer; and above all, they represent an utterly independent, scrupulously open-minded, but deeply passionate search for truth. Less, perhaps, than any other thinker does Berlin suppose himself in possession of some simple truth, and then proceed to interpret and rearrange the world in the light of it. Yet his essays are not scattered leaves, blown by the

four winds. Nor are they mere occasional pieces, standing in isolation from one another, significant only in the context of their original publication. For in so far as they proceed from a central vision of man and his capacities, and their transformation through historical time – a vision which is richly ramified, complex, and incapable of completion – they are bound lightly and naturally together at many hidden and unexpected levels. Time and again, Berlin raises and illuminates, in the light of vividly concrete historical examples, major issues with which he has dealt in a more abstract manner in his philosophical essays; issues which are not only at the core of his lifelong preoccupation with ideas, but of great intrinsic interest and importance in themselves, and at the forefront of attention today.

His essays sail manfully against the current in at least two ways. Many of them are devoted to intellectual figures of great originality who have either been largely ignored or else regarded with patronising disdain, both by their contemporaries and by later generations of scholars. Indeed, to help rescue from oblivion or neglect, and render historical justice to, thinkers who have been ignored, misrepresented or misunderstood, partly at least because they have dared to oppose the ruling intellectual orthodoxies of their time, is not the least of Berlin's services to scholarship. His essays on Vico, Hess and Sorel, to take but three examples, would be memorable for this alone. But what makes these essays so strikingly original and exciting is the sense we are given of the gradual birth of seminal new ideas, of the emergence since the mid-eighteenth century of some of the great cardinal notions of the modern world. For in examining the ideas of philosophers, thinkers, and men of vision like Vico, Hamann and Herder, Herzen and Sorel, Berlin displays a uniquely perceptive sensitivity to the deeper stirrings and movements, the dark, uneasy, brooding seasons of the human spirit beneath the bland rationalistic surface of the thought of an age, when a small but at times passionate voice of opposition, overlooked, misinterpreted or ridiculed by its contemporaries, utters in an often fragmentary or semi-articulate form novel ideas about man and his nature which are destined to grow into a world-transforming movement in a later day. From the doctrines of many of these thinkers some of their most powerful inspiration is drawn, directly or indirectly, by the many and various movements of protest which have grown up against some of the monolithic orthodoxies of our own time. And while Berlin is only too keenly aware of the insane excesses to which the views of some of these antinomian thinkers – in particular, per-

haps, Hamann, Herder and Sorel – may contribute, and have as a matter of fact contributed, yet the penetrating and painful insights they afford us cannot just be brushed aside. At every step forward in our collective development, Berlin seems to say, we must pause to listen sympathetically to the voices crying out in tortured dissent, or just raised to utter criticism, whether cautiously reasoned or wildly inchoate: we ignore them at our peril, for they may tell us something vital about ourselves; and, in so doing, point towards a larger and more generous (and perhaps more truthful) conception of what men are and can be.

Many of the subjects of his essays, therefore, are agonised men in the grips of a vision so novel and complex that they themselves are unable fully to comprehend and formulate it; they search and grope instinctively, not wholly aware of what it is that they are doing, searching for, attempting to express. This gives rise to the reflection that there may be many levels of intentional action, and that some of the insights of a man of original intellectual vision, and the full implications and consequences of these, may never become transparently clear, either to himself or to others, in his own lifetime; for if he has left some record of what he has thought or felt, the full significance and impact of what he was searching for – what, in effect, his underlying, evolving, still fully to be clarified aims were – may emerge only centuries after his death, when a sophisticated vocabulary and appropriate methods have grown up around the constellation of problems which he was among the very first to touch upon. The classic and most striking case of this is Vico. But in some degree it is surely true of most great writers and thinkers of richly suggestive vision, in so far as they have opened new and permanent doors of insight, perception and understanding.

II

At the heart of all Berlin's writings there is a cluster of perennial philosophical problems. The nature of self, will, freedom, human identity, personality and dignity; the manner and degree in which these can be abused, offended against, insulted, and their proper boundaries (whatever these may be) transgressed; the consequences, both probable and actual, of failing to understand them for what they are, and above all of torturing them into conformity with conceptual

systems and models which deny too much of their essential nature; the distinction between 'inner' human nature as opposed to 'external' physical nature, and between the basic categories and methods proper to their investigation – all these problems are touched upon, and our understanding of them enlarged and deepened, by the essays in this volume. Again, the burning issue of philosophical monism, the doctrine that all reality, and all the branches of our knowledge of it, form a rational, harmonious whole, and that there is ultimate unity or harmony between human ends, is discussed and criticised from many angles by close scrutiny of the cardinal doctrines of some of those thinkers who did most to undermine it. Berlin's preoccupation with the emergence of pluralism, both in the realms of ethical, political and aesthetic values, and in the sphere of human knowledge, so central to his writings in political theory, philosophy of history, and, to a lesser but still important degree, epistemology, is apparent in his choice and treatment of individual thinkers and currents of thought in his essays in the history of ideas. His major excavations in this field have helped bring to light ruined monuments and fragments, strange chunks of intellectual masonry, which seem at times to hint at the shadowy outlines of a phenomenology of European consciousness since the mid-eighteenth century – namely the emergence of novel types of transforming insight and general outlook, with their associated concepts and categories, at certain times and places and in certain thinkers or groups of thinkers – and thereby to throw light upon some of the questions that have troubled him most deeply, not just as an academic philosopher or as a professional scholar, but as a human being.

III

The history of ideas is a comparatively new field of study: it still craves recognition in a largely hostile world, though there are encouraging signs of a gradual change of heart even in the English-speaking world. There is a growing feeling that investigation of what men have thought and felt, and of the basic ideas in terms of which they have seen themselves and framed their aspirations, may provide a more luminous source of light in the study of man than the established social, political and psychological sciences, for all that many of these have developed an apparatus of specialised terminology and the use of empirical, quantitative methods. For in so far as they tend to

view men, both as individuals and groups, as the proper objects of the generalising empirical sciences, as so much passive, inexpressive material moulded by impersonal forces obedient to statistical or causal laws, these sciences tend to leave out, or at least play down, something of central importance: namely that men are defined precisely by their possession of an inner life, of purposes and ideals, and of a vision or conception, however hazy or implicit, of who they are, where they have come from, and what they are at. And indeed, it is just their possession of an inner life in this sense that distinguishes them from animals and natural objects. The history of ideas, because it attempts (among other things) to trace the birth and development of some of the ruling concepts of a civilisation or culture through long periods of mental change, and to reconstruct the image men have of themselves and their activities, in a given age and culture, probably makes a wider variety of demands upon its practitioners than almost any other discipline; or, at least, demands which are special, and often painful. The sharp logical skills of conceptual analysis required in the criticism of ideas, the rich stores of assimilated learning, the vast powers of sympathetic, reconstructive imagination akin to those of the creative artist – the capacity to 'enter into' and understand from 'inside' forms of life wholly different from his own – and the almost magical power of intuitive divination – these capacities, all ideally possessed by the historian of ideas, rarely come together in one man. This doubtless explains in part why there has never been more than a handful of genuine historians of ideas, and why the history of ideas itself, as a reputable discipline with universally accepted credentials of its own, should still have to battle for recognition.

Yet the great difficulties posed by the cultivation of a field of knowledge, and the consequent rarity of high achievement, are not in themselves alone sufficient to explain its comparative neglect. Are there, perhaps, deeper and less obvious reasons for its ambiguous status? Is it that by burrowing away in the foundations of some of our deepest assumptions it may excavate things long and conveniently forgotten, or taken to be more solid, more fixed and final, than they are? Or reopen painful questions about turnings taken in the course of our collective development, questions some of which may take on a new and disturbing significance today? Before our eyes, the granite bedrock of some of our most familiar and cherished beliefs may dissolve into shifting sand. At all events, many of Berlin's essays have called into question, implicitly or explicitly, some of the most ancient and most

deeply held assumptions of men, at any rate in the western world. And though the analogy is far from perfect, the history of ideas at its best may be able to do for a culture what psychoanalysis claims to be able to do for the individual: to analyse and lay bare the origins and nature not, it is true, of motivation and hidden springs of behaviour, but of the often implicit, deeply embedded, formative ideas, concepts and categories – some of which are more provisional and open to historical change than could have seemed possible before the last half of the eighteenth century – by means of which we order and interpret a major part of our experience, above all in the peculiarly human spheres of moral, aesthetic and political activity; and in so doing enlarge both our self-knowledge and our sense of the scope of our creative liberty.

Berlin's life has been spent in the study of philosophy and the examination, criticism and exposition of general ideas. If we are to understand the peculiar status the history of ideas holds for him, as well as the unique nature of his own contribution to it, we must know something of the philosophical background out of which his interests grew. Berlin has himself often repeated the sharp-eyed insight that, in the western tradition at least, from Plato to our own day, the overwhelming majority of systematic thinkers of all schools, whether rationalists, idealists, phenomenalists, positivists or empiricists, have, despite their many radical differences, proceeded on one central unargued assumption: that reality, whatever mere appearances may indicate to the contrary, is in essence a rational whole where all things ultimately cohere. They suppose that there exists (at least in principle) a body of discoverable truths touching all conceivable questions, both theoretical and practical; that there is, and can be, only one correct method or set of methods for gaining access to these truths; and that these truths, as well as the methods used in their discovery, are universally valid. Their procedure usually takes the following form: they first identify a privileged class of indubitable entities or incorrigible propositions, claiming an exclusive logical or ontological status for these, and assigning appropriate methods for their discovery; and finally, with a gusto that has deep psychological roots in the instinct for both order and destruction, reject as 'not real', confused or, at times, 'nonsense' what cannot be translated into the type of entity or proposition which they have chosen as the impregnable model. Descartes with his doctrine of clear and distinct ideas, or Leibniz with his notion of a *mathesis universalis*, or latter-day positivists with

their atomic propositions and protocol sentences, or phenomenalists and sense-data theorists with their sense-*qualia*, all exemplify this reductionist tendency. Thinkers of this kind are prone, on the basis of their doctrines, to seek to carry out a radical revision of reality, in theory or in practice, relegating much that seems prima facie meaningful or important to their philosophical bonfire; often enough, things of priceless value have been consumed by the flames, and much of what remains has been fearfully mutilated or distorted.

It is against this background that we must view, on the one hand, Berlin's attitude to one of the most influential philosophical currents of his time, that associated with the neo-positivism of Russell and his disciples, and, on the other, his absorbed preoccupation with humane studies and, above all, with the history of ideas. In a number of essays – 'Logical Translation', 'Verification', 'Empirical Propositions and Hypothetical Statements'[1] – written when he was still teaching and working in the field of general philosophy, Berlin set out to square accounts with logical positivism by offering a critique of some of the central doctrines upon which it rests. These essays, while they represent a kind of valedictory to a particular way of doing philosophy, contain at the same time the seeds of a covert manifesto. Berlin's keen sense of the irreducibly wide variety of kinds of experience and types of proposition, and of the impossibility of expressing them in or translating them out into one type of proposition, or of analysing all the contents of the universe in terms of one basic kind of entity or 'stuff', is here given free expression in the spheres of logic and epistemology. Things are as they are, and we do well not to analyse away what makes them uniquely themselves.

What makes these essays so particularly fascinating and important is twofold: they are written from within the ranks of the philosophical tendency which he criticises, and, in so far as they reveal certain very deep-rooted attitudes and convictions on his own part, they point towards, and help enlarge our understanding of, both his intense interest in the history of ideas and his conception of philosophy's role. While these essays constitute a fundamental critique of one of the major schools of modern philosophy, and a radical break with it, they are above all the expression of the deep and unsilenceable misgivings of a sympathetic insider, of someone who has fully grasped – perhaps too fully – the aims and methods of the intellectual movement he criticises,

[1] Reprinted in *Concepts and Categories* (London, 1978; New York, 1979), the second volume of this series.

and who, try as he will, cannot accept them. Indeed, it is tempting to see an analogy between Berlin's reaction to the philosophy of Hume, Russell, Ayer, the early Wittgenstein, Carnap, the Vienna Circle and the main strains of neo-positivism, with their reductionist methods of ironing and flattening out, and the rejection by philosophers like Vico of Descartes and the rationalists of his time, or the attitude of visionaries and thinkers like Hamann and Herder to the doctrines of the French Enlightenment. For these, too, were thinkers who understood perfectly the goals and methods of their opponents, and to whom Berlin has subsequently turned and devoted a deep and sympathetic understanding. Yet he is entirely free of their partisan vehemence, remote from their at times alarmingly obscurantist tendencies, and far from blind to the great cardinal merits of the opposition: he acknowledges the great achievements of logical positivism in clearing the ground of much metaphysical nonsense, and time and again in his writings he pays passing tribute to the great triumphs of the natural sciences, which he sees as the most successful single endeavour of the human intellect in modern times; and just as often he reiterates the conviction that all phenomena that are properly tractable by the quantitative methods of the empirical sciences, without violence to or denial of their innermost natures, should be brought under the umbrella of causal or statistical laws.

The inadequacy of simple reductionist frameworks is most keenly felt in that vast, amorphous, volatile area which comprises spiritual, moral, aesthetic and political experience. Here, more than anywhere else, it is deeply misleading and often injurious to apply simple reductionist concepts; and under one aspect, Berlin's entire philosophical *oeuvre* may be seen as a long battle, now overt, now covert, but always subtle, resourceful and determined, against the facile application of inadequate models and concepts in the field of human studies. Men should never be blinded by the distorting spectacles of theory to what they know immediately to be true of themselves. Many of his essays offer a sensitive and subtle investigation of the impingement, for example, of our increasingly exact and sophisticated knowledge of the natural, external world upon the inner, moral and spiritual worlds of human experience. The pieces on Vico's theory of knowledge, the essays on Hamann and Hume, and Sorel, and the essay on nationalism, may be seen to connect in this regard with some of the major concerns of 'Historical Inevitability'.[1] For again and again Berlin warns

[1] Reprinted in *Four Essays on Liberty* (London and New York, 1969).

against two fatal dangers: that of subscribing to all-embracing systems which, while they may afford novel and genuine insight, are yet one-sided and over-simple, incapable of doing justice to enough of the facts while turning all or most attention to those they have brought to light, and seeing all else in terms of them; and that of transferring methods and procedures from one discipline, where they have been enormously successful, to another where they are not at home, in which their application distorts or even destroys the facts.

There is perhaps no more illuminating flash of self-disclosure in Berlin's writings than the passage in his essay on his friend John Austin[1] where, after depicting the originality and power of Austin's intellect, his boldness and philosophical fertility, his astonishing capacity for breaking up problems into tiny pieces, he tells us that Austin commanded his affection and respect above all for this passing comment: 'They all *talk* about determinism and *say* they believe in it. I've never met a determinist in my life, I mean a man who really did believe in it as you and I believe that men are mortal. Have you?' Philosophers ruminating in their studies, or natural scientists conducting experiments in their laboratories, might claim to be determinists in theory, but their moral conduct and their practical lives, the words they utter and the judgements they make, belie their surface professions.

For Berlin, philosophy cannot yield *a priori* knowledge of man's nature or of the universe; nor by logical translation can it afford us certain and incorrigible empirical knowledge. Thus where Ayer persisted in the path of logical positivism, buttressing, developing and refining his central doctrines, and Austin, like the later Wittgenstein, turned to a close and detailed analysis of the concepts of ordinary language, Berlin was drawn increasingly, in his search for answers to some of the central questions of philosophy, to a concrete historical study of some of the major intellectual developments in western culture since the eighteenth century. This led him to explore and deepen the notion that a large part of the thought and experience of a period is organised by what Collingwood termed 'constellations of absolute presuppositions'.

[1] 'Austin and the Early Beginnings of Oxford Philosophy', reprinted in *Personal Impressions* (London, 1980; New York, 1981), the fourth volume of this series.