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HEDGEHOG AND FOX

Review Article

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Isaiah Berlin, *The First and the Last*, introduced by H. Hardy (New York: New York Review Books, 1999), 141 pp., US$19.95, ISBN 0940322099.

Isaiah Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, ed. H. Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 240 pp., US$39.95, ISBN 069105018x.

Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty*, ed. H. Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 182, US$35.00, ISBN 0691090998.

Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. H. Hardy, 2nd edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 382, US$18.95, ISBN 019924989x.

Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, ed. H. Hardy (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 382, US$18.95, ISBN 0691057273.

Ronald Dworkin, Mark Lilla and Robert B. Silvers, eds, *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), pp. 198, US$22.95, ISBN 0940322595.

In one of his most famous essays, Isaiah Berlin quotes a fragment from the Greek poet Archilochus: 'The fox knows many things,

but the hedgehog knows one big thing' ('The Hedgehog and the Fox', in Berlin (1978c, 22)). The contrast is a metaphor for the crucial distinction at the heart of Berlin's thought between monist and pluralist accounts of moral value. According to monism, a single value or narrow set of values overrides all others, while on the pluralist view human goods are multiple, conflicting and incommensurable. Monism, Berlin believes, harbours political dangers that pluralism avoids. While the great authoritarian visions of politics have all rested on monist foundations, pluralism is naturally aligned with toleration, moderation and liberalism.

Berlin, the pluralist and liberal, thus tends to present himself as a fox, and certainly he knew many things. He is best known for his distinction between negative and positive liberty, but there is far more to him than this. His biographer Michael Ignatieff notes Berlin's contributions not only in liberal political theory but also in 'analytical philosophy, in the intellectual history of Marxism, the Enlightenment, and the Counter-Enlightenment' (Ignatieff 1998, 10). One could add Berlin's work on 19th Century Russian thought, on the history of nationalism, on Jewish identity, and on many other topics. Something of Berlin's range is indicated by the essays collected in *The Power of Ideas* and by the contributions, from friends and colleagues, to *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*.

Indeed, there is some truth in the widespread judgement that Berlin is primarily an historian of ideas rather than a political thinker. Certainly his characteristic style is very different from that of most Anglophone political philosophers. Richly contextual, Berlin's discussions are typically focused less on the logic of a thinker's arguments than on the subject's personality and social and intellectual background. His object is not so much to assess the validity of the case before him, but rather to reconstruct, as vividly as possible, the world as it appeared to the writer in question, and then let readers draw their own conclusions. Berlin's feats of imaginative reconstruction, in particular of the profoundly illiberal thought of anti-Enlightenment thinkers like Joseph de Maistre and J. G. Hamann, are rightly celebrated.

Berlin's brilliance as a historian should not, however, blind us to his significance in political thought. Most of his work, however extraordinary its range, can be seen to fall within, or to emerge out of, a single overarching project. Inside the fox there is a hedgehog after all. The project is a search for the origins of 20th Century totalitarianism. For Berlin, these are primarily intellectual origins.

While he does not discount sociological and material factors, Berlin's emphasis is on 'the power of ideas'. Ideas, beliefs and values matter, he insists, and matter enormously.

That ideas matter is a view that Berlin attributes in part to his Russian background. Although he may seem like the quintessential figure of the British establishment—the Fellow of All Souls, the knight of the realm, the holder of an Oxford chair—Berlin was in various ways an outsider in his adopted society, and he always thought of himself partly in that way. He was born in 1909 in Riga, then part of the Russian Empire. His family were prosperous Russian Jews, his father a successful timber merchant. During the First World War, the family moved to St. Petersburg and in due course witnessed the revolutions of 1917. One of Berlin's formative experiences was, as a boy of seven, seeing a Tsarist policeman being dragged along the street by a crowd, probably to his death as the young Isaiah thought. The scene stayed with him as an image of the human reality of violent revolution.

The First and the Last testifies to the impact on Berlin of the political context of that early incident. This short book consists of two main pieces, one his earliest surviving essay, the other his final intellectual testament. (The remaining items are tributes to Berlin written after his death in 1997.) The first piece is a fictional story written by Berlin when he was twelve years old and now a student at St Paul's School in London, where the family had moved in 1922. The story is about the assassination of a Russian revolutionary official whose motto gives the piece its title: 'The Purpose Justifies the Ways'. This phrase captures an idea that remains one of Berlin's critical targets throughout his career: the revolutionary notion that certain ideals (like the liberation of the proletariat) are so overriding that their pursuit justifies anything at all. The notion of the overriding value is what Berlin was later to identify as moral monism. Here one can already see Berlin's concern for the immediate power of this particular idea, which turns against the official who tries to employ it.

The other main piece in *The First and the Last* is 'My Intellectual Path', Berlin's own account of his development as a thinker. This essay, also printed in *The Power of Ideas*, is a very useful brief introduction to the general shape of Berlin's thought. The story begins with his training in philosophy at Oxford, where Berlin spent the whole of his life, with the exception of the War years, after his entry as an undergraduate in 1928. In 1930s' Oxford, the

most vigorous philosophical movement was logical positivism. This was the view, popularised in England by Berlin's friend A. J. Ayer (1936), that the sole criteria for meaning were those of the natural sciences; 'metaphysical' claims that could not be verified either by observation or logical deduction were in a strict sense meaningless. Into the dustbin of the meaningless went all the claims of religion and many of the traditional claims, even questions, of philosophy, including those of ethics.

Berlin was attracted to the no-nonsense empiricism of the logical positivists, but repelled by the narrowness of their version of empiricism. As he matured he came to see the legitimate field of philosophy as lying precisely in those 'queer' questions that can be answered neither by empirical information nor by logic alone (Berlin 1978a, 3). Rather, the proper task of philosophy is to examine the 'concepts and categories', the assumptions and paradigms, through which we understand the world. The validity of these cannot be scientifically verified, yet they are a central and indispensable condition for human knowledge. In large part, they are a product of contingent cultural and historical context, reflecting the most basic purposes and values of human beings at particular times and in particular places. These purposes and values can only be understood from the 'inside'—that is, by placing oneself in the shoes of the people concerned—rather than by adopting the external, God's-eye objectivity of the scientist. Hence the importance of history, in particular the history of ideas. While modern scientific method is essential to our knowledge of the natural world, 'scientism', the glib assumption that the same method will reveal the workings of the human world too, is a profound error. The logical positivism of 1930s Oxford taught Berlin how *not* to think philosophically, and led him by opposition to the history of ideas.

This historical direction in Berlin's development was strengthened by his accepting, in 1933, a commission to write an introduction to the thought of Marx. Accessible and surprisingly sympathetic to Marx in several respects, not least his historicism, Berlin's *Karl Marx: his life and environment* was first published in 1939 and is still widely read in its fourth edition (Berlin 1978b). Here is Berlin's first exercise in the inside view, and its vivid recreation of the origins and shape of Marx's mental world is a considerable success. *The Power of Ideas* contains one of Berlin's lesser essays on

Marx, but this gives no more than a small taste of his approach to that thinker.

The Power of Ideas is more valuable for its inclusion of several of Berlin's writings on Jewish themes. Along with the English and Russian components of his identity, Berlin's Jewishness is by his own account one of the most powerful influences on his thought ('The Three Strands in My Life', in Berlin (1998)). It is to his Jewish heritage that Berlin attributes his strong sense of the value of cultural and national 'belonging' as essential to human well-being. This side of his thought is expressed most strongly in 'Jewish Slavery and Emancipation', first published in 1951 but hard to find before its reprinting here. Here he defends the ideal of a Jewish homeland and state as the implementation of a human right, liberating a people from a painful historical fate under which they had hitherto been eternal strangers in other people's societies.

At the same time, Berlin resists the claims of fellow Jews like as Arthur Koestler that, after the creation of Israel, the only authentically Jewish life must be that of the Israeli citizen. For Berlin, there are many ways of being Jewish. The existence of Israel is liberating because at last the Jewish people have a choice about whether to move there or to stay where they are. Similarly, in 'The Origins of Israel' (1951), Berlin argues that the only 'duty' of Israelis is to live 'ordinary' lives rather than to realise any single elevated ideal of Jewishness. In these essays, he shows that his life-long Zionism was tempered by a universalist concern for human well-being and human rights. His last public statement, drafted just before his death , was an appeal to the Israeli people to accept a peaceful, partition-based settlement with the Palestinians. The same rights of self-determination claimed by the Jewish people must apply, so far as they are valid, to the Palestinian people too. Berlin's recognition of nationalism as a political force that might be managed and liberalised but never eradicated or transcended has strongly influenced a number of prominent commentators on inter-cultural politics, including Ignatieff (1993) and Berlin's student Yael Tamir (1993).

It is for his work on the idea of freedom, however, that Berlin is best known. The immediate background to this part of his thought is the Cold War. During the Second World War, Berlin served as a British official, first in New York and then in Washington, before being posted in late 1945 to the British Embassy in Moscow. There and in Leningrad he came into contact

with leading Russian writers and intellectuals, in particular Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova, and from them learned at first hand the crushing effects of Stalinism on the human spirit, especially the creative spirit. These meetings, movingly described in *Personal Impressions* (1998), help to account for Berlin's two major preoccupations of the 1950s. One of these is the writing of that mid-19th Century generation of Russian liberals and radicals whose thought might have provided an alternative to Marxism-Leninism. *The Power of Ideas* contains some brief essays in this area, but Berlin's main work on these figures is collected in *Russian Thinkers* (1978c).

Berlin's other great theme of the 1950s is the fate of human freedom in the modern world. His view that the Soviet system and the Marxist philosophy underlying it are fundamentally opposed to human liberty is deeply felt and memorably expressed, but not in itself unusual. The originality of Berlin's anti-communism is twofold. First, he analyses the threat not merely as a rejection or devaluing of liberty but as a hijacking and subsequent corruption of the idea. The problem is not outright opposition to freedom but a more insidious betrayal of the very concept of freedom by political leaders and intellectuals. Second, Berlin hints that the roots of the betrayal lie deeper than the crude logic of Sovietism or even the more sophisticated system of Marx. Rather, the sources of Stalinist tyranny are to be found at the heart of modern political thought, in both romanticism and the Enlightenment, and further back still, in the monist outlook that informs the mainstream of Western thought as a whole.

By what steps does this twisting of the idea of freedom occur? Perhaps the most dramatic account Berlin gives of this process is contained in the BBC broadcasts he gave in 1952, now published as *Freedom and its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty*. The 'six enemies' of the subtitle are Helvétius, Rousseau, Fichte, Hegel, Saint-Simon and de Maistre. Significantly, the list does not include Marx: Berlin's net is now cast wider and deeper—although Marx remains something of an unseen presence in several of these lectures. The six thinkers are the intellectual ancestors of twentieth-century communism and fascism. All of them claim to be benefactors of humanity, and some to be champions of liberty. But all produce, in the end, doctrines highly destructive of 'what is normally meant' by individual liberty, namely the negative idea, 'the right freely to shape one's life as one wishes' (p. 5).

Berlin's enemies of freedom divide into three categories. Most straightforwardly Maistre represents those openly opposed to individual liberty. Liberty, for Maistre, is positively dangerous, one of the shibboleths of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment that led to the French Revolution. His grim view of human nature, his emphasis on struggle and death, his worship of the state and the irrational—all these themes make Maistre a precursor of fascism. In a second category are those thinkers who merely neglect rather than openly reject individual liberty. They may allow that liberty is something to be valued, but the effect of their thought is to promote other values as more important. Typical of this tendency are those who want to reconstruct human knowledge and society on scientific lines, and prominent representatives of this scientific (or scientistic) outlook include the utilitarian reformer Helvétius and the technocratic elitist Saint-Simon.

It is the third category, however, which contains the most dangerous because the most seductive kind of thinker. These are the writers who claim to be on the side of liberty, even to rank it above all other values, but who redefine it to mean its very opposite: Berlin's famous 'inversion thesis'. This begins with Rousseau, for whom the vulgar idea of liberty as negative non-interference refers merely to an amoral, animal licence. True human liberty entails the liberation of that which is distinctively human, namely a person's capacity for self-direction in accordance with moral rules, the will of 'the true self'. In political society, the true self is to be identified with the state. Hence political freedom is obedience to 'the General Will', the will of the whole sovereign body for the common good. That is why someone can be 'forced to be free', in Rousseau's famous, and for Berlin notorious, phrase. The state may know your true will better than you do. In forcing you to act in accordance with its laws, it merely liberates your authentic moral will from your appetites. Liberty on this view means surrender to the state. Starting from Rousseau's 'deification of the notion of absolute liberty', Berlin writes, 'we gradually reach the notion of absolute despotism' (p. 47). The result is a licence for authoritarian and totalitarian leaders to defend oppression in the name of freedom. The pattern set by Rousseau is reproduced and developed by Fichte, Hegel and ultimately (so we can infer) Marx.

The inversion of liberty is again the central theme in the most famous of all Berlin's essays, 'Two Concepts of Liberty'. Originating as Berlin's inaugural lecture at Oxford, 'Two Concepts'

was first published in 1958 and later revised for the widely read *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969). *Four Essays* has now been superseded by the further revised and expanded *Liberty*. In 'Two Concepts', the Rousseauian or 'romantic' conception of freedom as authentic self-mastery is now labelled the 'positive' conception, in contrast with negative non-interference. Berlin's central argument is that the positive idea, although benign in some forms, is inherently vulnerable to the kind of distortion that it receives in the tradition of political thought that runs from Rousseau to Marx. By and large, the implication seems to be (although this is never explicit) that we should be wary of the positive family of concepts and stick to the negative as the safer alternative.

Over the forty years since its first appearance, 'Two Concepts' has generated an immense critical literature, ranging from the highly favourable to the violently hostile. A good deal of attention has also been paid to another essay in the 1969 collection, 'Historical Inevitability', in which Berlin argues against the determinism that he detects in Marxism. One of the features of the new *Liberty* is an extremely useful bibliographical essay by Ian Harris which summarises or lists much of the leading commentary on various aspects of Berlin's work. The original pieces from *Four Essays* are now supplemented by several of Berlin's other writings on liberty, most notably 'From Hope and Fear Set Free', which was at one time intended for inclusion in the book that became *Four Essays*. How this intention was defeated and how *Four Essays* came to be published several years behind schedule—a result of Berlin's endless rewriting and procrastination—is a story entertainingly told by Berlin's editor and literary executor Henry Hardy in another addition, 'The Editor's Tale'. Hardy is the unsung hero of Berlin studies, since he has been responsible for rounding up for publication many of Berlin's fugitive writings that would otherwise have remained on the run. Most of the books reviewed here would not have appeared without his efforts. Hardy also maintains a website, the 'Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library' (Hardy 2003), which is an invaluable resource for material by and about Berlin.

In the last section of 'Two Concepts', Berlin makes explicit a theme which he had often hinted at before—his notion of value pluralism and its political implications. The roots of Soviet totalitarianism include positive liberty but they go deeper. Beneath the notion of the true self is the broader idea of a single,

universally valid moral system: moral monism. This has been the dominant 'perennial philosophy' of the West since the Greeks. But Berlin argues that monism is false. The values and purposes of human beings, although universal in part, are multiple, potentially conflicting, and incommensurable. They are so radically distinct that there is no common measure by which they can be ranked in a universal system that will resolve all conflicts.

Consequently there can be no perfect society in which all human values are realised simultaneously. What stands in the way of moral and political perfection is not conflict between good and evil, but conflict between good and good. The political lesson of value pluralism, according to Berlin, is strongly anti-utopian and broadly liberal. If moral perfection is impossible, then so too is political perfection; hence the Marxist dream of the final harmonisation of social forces and human interests at the end of history is just that—a dream. The reality we must face is of awkward, sometimes tragic choices, and inevitable, and reasonable, disagreement over what those choices should be. The politics of pluralism will accommodate those choices and disagreements rather than trying to transcend them. Politically, therefore, value pluralism points in the direction of freedom of choice, toleration and moderation: the values of liberalism.

Since the 18th Century, however, moral monism has been powerfully reinforced by the scientism characteristic of the mainstream of the French Enlightenment. The Parisian *philosophes* were the ancestors of the Oxford logical positivists. Berlin's attitude to the Enlightenment is consequently highly ambivalent. He is strongly committed to its values of individual liberty and the reasoned questioning of prescriptive practices. But he is also deeply suspicious of the Enlightenment fixation on the natural sciences as the model for all knowledge: its coldly objective view of human behaviour, its lack of historical sensitivity and blindness to the virtues of past civilisations, and its glib faith in a linear pattern of progress in human affairs, a faith which at the extreme embraces the notion of a perfected society in which all human goods are realised wholly and simultaneously. The Enlightenment stands for freedom but also for the scientistic utopianism that has betrayed freedom in the communist world of the 20th Century.

This is why Berlin seeks an antidote to scientism, and to monism more generally, in what might seem to be an unlikely source, those 18th Century critics of the French *philosophes* whom

he labels collectively 'the Counter-Enlightenment'. The key figures identified by Berlin in this regard (apart from Maistre) are Vico, Hamann and Herder, and his main work on these writers is now collected in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*. Despite many differences, what all these thinkers have in common is hostility to scientism, an embracing of the inside view as a genuine source of knowledge, and as a consequence a commitment to various kinds of particularist understanding. This particularism is at its most extreme in Hamann, for whom, it seems, every generalisation and law-like proposition is an insult to the concrete reality and variety of God's creation. Berlin is happier with Vico's emphasis on differences of historical perspective and Herder's insistence on the unique 'personalities' and outlooks of different cultures. He concedes that the anti-systematic thought of writers like Hamann is one of the sources of the cult of the irrational that produced fascism. But Berlin also believes that the particularism of the Counter-Enlightenment thinkers anticipates the value pluralism which undermines the monist thinking behind Stalin's Soviet Union.

Berlin's work on the Counter-Enlightenment adds historical depth to his idea of value pluralism, but it also opens up a major problem. If 'value pluralism' is identical with the cultural particularism he finds in Herder in particular, then what is there to distinguish value pluralism from cultural relativism? And if Berlin's ethic is really just another form of cultural relativism, then what is the force of his political commitment to liberalism, the basis for his condemnation of the Soviet Union? The view that Berlin attributes to Herder and calls 'pluralism' is that cultures are incommensurable, that each is its own normative measure. In that case, it would seem that all values are relative to their cultural sources, each of which is morally unassailable except on its own terms. Liberalism on this relativist view can be no more than the political voice of a particular kind of culture, one that happens to place a high value on individual liberty and toleration. Soviet culture and its priorities will be no less legitimate, and the traditional universalism of the liberal project will then have to be abandoned. The standard liberal claim, for example, that human rights are valid not only locally but universally will be false. In short, the twin supports of Berlin's political thought, his liberal universalism and his value pluralism, threaten to pull apart.

This tension at the heart of Berlin's thought is one he never expressly resolves or even acknowledges as a real difficulty. Yet it has been a frequent target of hostile critics, such as Leo Strauss (1989), who have tried to paint Berlin's liberalism as incoherent. Friendlier commentators, too, have seized on the apparently relativist aspects of Berlin to present him as a champion of conservative communitarianism or modus vivendi pragmatism. John Gray (1995a, 1995b, 2000) and John Kekes (1993, 1997) are the leading figures in this regard.

The trouble with these relativist interpretations of Berlin is that, first, they do not account for the strength of his liberal commitments and, second, they operate with a misleading account of what value pluralism means to Berlin, or at least what it ought to mean. Value pluralism crucially involves the notion of incommensurability, but incommensurability of what? If it is solely or primarily cultures that are incommensurable, then it is hard to see how 'value pluralism' is different from cultural relativism. Berlin's treatment of Herder does abet this view. But in 'Two Concepts' and elsewhere it is not so much cultures but rather 'goods' or 'ends' or 'values'—like liberty and equality—that are said to be incommensurable. If it is incommensurability of goods we are talking about, including at least some universal goods, then value pluralism can be distinguished from cultural relativism, since the conflicts and choices involved will cut across cultural perspectives. The same basic conflicts and choices will recur within many cultures. And if that is so, then liberal universalists have a better chance of reconciling liberalism with pluralism, even of grounding liberalism in pluralism, because liberalism might then be presented as the optimum political system for accommodating and managing conflicts and choices which are not only local but universal. This is roughly the line taken by recent attempts to revive the liberal reading of Berlinian pluralism, including William Galston's *Liberal Pluralism* (2002) and my own *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (Crowder 2002).

A further large question that Berlin never adequately addresses is why we should believe that values really are plural in his sense. In 'Two Concepts' he refers briefly to the evidence of our 'ordinary experience' of widespread and often intransigent moral conflict. But monists could retort that our ordinary experience of moral conflict is consistent with the existence of a monist order which we simply have not yet understood. Ronald Dworkin takes

this line in his contribution to *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*, a collection of commentaries on different aspects of Berlin's work based on a celebratory symposium. Dworkin worries that Berlin's notion of moral conflicts as sometimes involving the clash of incommensurables may be a prescription for doing nothing in areas such as welfare redistribution where action is urgently needed. For Dworkin, to suppose that liberty and equality, for example, are clashing incommensurable values is to suppose that there is no rational way of choosing between them. But to see liberty and equality as incommensurables may simply be to misunderstand them. Once these ideas are properly 'contoured' (liberty, for example, should probably be understood in ways other than Berlin's negative idea), we may see that there is no conceptual conflict between them after all.

To this the late Bernard Williams replies, also in *The Legacy*, that to acknowledge the incommensurability of goods is not necessarily to be paralysed when it comes to reasoned decision-making. We can recognise that liberty and equality are incommensurables, but still conclude, for example, that the overall desirability of a system of public education requires redistribution that in turn necessitates limitations of liberty for the sake of equality. The significance of Berlinian pluralism in this situation is that it reminds us that the chosen policy, for which there is reasoned justification overall, is not without real costs. It still makes sense to regret the loss of liberty involved even when we have acted rightly. Those who argued for liberty in this case lost the argument and may have been wrong about the merits of the policy overall, but they were not necessarily wrong in their understanding of the nature and value of liberty in general. That understanding may help justify a decision in favour of liberty where the circumstances are different.

Williams's remarks capture something of the spirit and power of Berlin's pluralist insight. As against the smooth and seamless systems of utopians, we should retain the thought that gains in human affairs, even net gains if we can be confident that they are such, are not without costs. Values outweighed in one set of circumstances are still values, and should perhaps be promoted in another situation. The appalling spectacle of Soviet dictatorship in the 20th Century was the outcome of monist thought, with its faith in social and political perfectibility, taken to an extreme. But the failure and destruction of the Soviet system does not mean that Berlin's warnings are out of date. As the '11 September' events

have made all too clear, the idea that liberation can be sought through total identification with an ideal that overrides everything else is alive and flourishing in our world. Less dramatically but no less importantly, the reality of hard choices in politics continues to be denied both by the wishful utopianism of some on the Left, for whom all good causes coalesce, and the narrow cost-benefit analysis of their counterparts on the Right, who suppose that all human goods can be commensurated with a calculator. Berlin's value pluralism is not as carefully and thoroughly developed as one might wish, but it has the potential to become a powerful weapon against the monisms of our time.

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