

**“A CAUTIOUS, SOBER LOVE AFFAIR WITH
HUMANITY:”**
HUMANISM IN THE THOUGHT OF ISAIAH BERLIN

Joshua L. Cherniss

The following was written as a senior essay in Political Science at Yale University, from which the author expects to receive his B.A. in May of 2002. It remains very much a work-in-progress. Any comments on it would be most welcome, and may be conveyed by writing the author at joshua.cherniss@yale.edu

© Joshua L. Cherniss 2002

Not to be cited without the author's permission

**This text was prepared by the author and no responsibility is taken for the substance or form of its
its content by the website manager**

**“A CAUTIOUS, SOBER LOVE AFFAIR WITH
HUMANITY:”¹**
HUMANISM IN THE THOUGHT OF ISAIAH BERLIN

INTRODUCTION

A. Opening Reflections

Isaiah Berlin occupied a curious place in the intellectual life of his day, and is proving hard to categorize posthumously. Not exactly a philosopher, political theorist, historian, or literary critic, he was a little of each. He has been described as conventional and radical, brilliant and mediocre, an exemplar and defender of the Enlightenment and a spokesman for its opponents; a man shaped by and representative of his time, and a figure from another, earlier age. Long viewed as a prolix and protean “general intellectual,” he is now seen by some as a serious thinker whose work articulates a powerful central doctrine; but whether that doctrine is pluralism or liberalism is a matter of dispute, and this debate has come to dominate discussions of Berlin’s thought.

I believe that these attempts to pigeonhole Berlin misrepresent the nature of his achievement, and miss the main value of his work. Berlin himself believed that all thinkers are driven by an inner core of commitment, and that their explicit doctrines are outworks erected to protect an “inner citadel” of belief, a fundamental perception of the

¹ I have taken the title from the contribution by Amos Oz to Ben Rogers et. al., “The Voice of Isaiah,” *The Independent on Sunday* 5 June 1994, p. 30

world.² In seeking to understand thinkers "it is more important to grasp this central notion or image ... than even the most forceful arguments with which they defend their views and refute actual and possible objections."³ To understand Berlin we must penetrate to this 'inner citadel', which gave form and force to his varied ideas. Berlin's work is best understood not as a systematic doctrine, but as a set of (often closely inter-related) ideas held together by a unifying, animating sensibility. In attempting to understand the nature and motivation of Berlin's work, as well as the lessons that we may derive from it, we would do best to follow Berlin's own approach: to identify the recurrent and predominant emotional commitments and moral ideals that ran through and shaped his thought, and from which his work derived its urgency and importance.

In the essay that follows I attempt to focus on what is arguably the innermost room in Berlin's inner citadel: Berlin's humanism. I here use the term "humanism" to describe not a single philosophical position or doctrine, but a cluster of closely associated beliefs and commitments which, I argue, underlay, formed, and guided Berlin's more familiar and explicit positions.

I have chosen to focus on Berlin's humanism both because I regard it as of central importance to the development of his thought; and because it has been neglected in many of the discussions and debates about Berlin's project and legacy which have taken place over the past decade. Most recent studies of Berlin have focused on his articulated philosophical positions, especially his doctrines of liberalism and pluralism.⁴

² Berlin's use of the image of the "inner citadel," which he ascribed to Bertrand Russell, recurs in several places in his writings, e.g. "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life" and "The Birth of Greek Individualism," both now collected in *Liberty*; see pp. 245–6, 288. (For an explanation and full citations of references to Berlin's works, see the bibliographical note at the end of this essay. All references are, unless otherwise noted, to works by Isaiah Berlin.)

³ "Georges Sorel," AC p. 298

⁴The sometimes single-minded focus on pluralism in Berlin's work owes much to the incisive and often contentious writings of John Gray, especially his book *Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton:

Princeton University Press, 1996). Among the many writings on Berlin that interpret his thought in terms of pluralism (even if they disagree with Gray) are: Henry Hardy, 'Berlin's Big Idea', *Philosophers' Magazine* 11 (Summer 2000), 15–16; Michael Lessnoff, "Isaiah Berlin: Monism and Pluralism" in *Political Philosophers of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); Michael Walzer, "Are there Limits to Liberalism?," *New York Review of Books*, 19 October 1995, 28–31; Daniel M. Weinstock, "The Graying of Berlin," *Critical Review* 11 No 4 (Fall 1997), 481–501; and Bernard Williams' "Introduction" to Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, pp. xi–xviii; see also the special issue of the journal *Social Research* devoted to this topic: Arien Mack (ed.), *Liberty and Pluralism* [*Social Research* 66 No 4 (Winter 1999)]. There have also been several attempts to portray Berlin as first and foremost a liberal; the best of these are probably Steven Lukes, "The Singular and the Plural: On the Distinctive Liberalism of Isaiah Berlin," *Social Research* 61 (1994), 687–718; and Jonathan Riley, "Interpreting Berlin's Liberalism," *American Political Science Review* 95 (2001), 283–95; also recommended is Robert Wokler, "Singular Praise for a Pluralist," *Times Higher Education Supplement* 3 March 1995, 22. Claude Galipeau's *Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) depicts Berlin's thought as a variety of liberalism, but one to which pluralism and an appreciation of the importance of belonging were central. There have, in comparison, been few attempts to portray Berlin's thought as distinctively or centrally humanistic, although descriptions of Berlin as a "humanist" abound. This description is of more than passing significance in Yehoshua Arieli, "Sir Isaiah Berlin: Humanism and the Romantic Experience" in Avishai Margalit, ed. *On the Thought of Isaiah Berlin: Papers Presented in Honour of Professor Sir Isaiah Berlin on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday* (Jerusalem, 1990: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities), pp. 12–28; and Professor Margalit's own, excellent article (which is, nevertheless, more a profile of Berlin than an analysis of his ideas), "The Philosopher of Sympathy: Isaiah Berlin and the Fate of Humanism," *New Republic*, 20 February 1995, 31–7. A general consideration of Berlin's work which gives his humanism its proper place and emphasis is Roger Hausheer's Introduction to *Against the Current*; while Noel Annan's Introduction to *Personal Impressions* illuminates the ways in which Berlin's work is "personal" as I use the term below. An important aspect of what one might call Berlin's humanistic approach to the history of ideas – his treatment of past thinkers as living individuals – highlighted by Alan Ryan; see especially "A Glamorous Salon: Isaiah Berlin's Disparate Gifts," *Encounter* 43 No 4 (October 1974) pp. 67–72. Berlin has also been recognized as essentially "a humanist in mind and heart" in an excellent review of his book *Russian Thinkers* by Helen Muchnic, "The Undefeated" in *The New York Review of Books*, June 15, 1978 pp. 21–24. And a central component of what I refer to as Berlin's humanism has been very perceptively highlighted and expressed, under the term "anti-Procrusteanism" (which I have adopted, and discuss below) by Jonathan Allen in his superb review of *The Sense of Reality*, in the *South African Journal of Philosophy* 17 No 2 (1998), 173–7, to which I am particularly indebted. (For further

These aspects of Berlin's work are of genuine and considerable importance, and an investigation of each can render much insight into the nature of Berlin's intellectual project.

However, many of the studies focusing on these aspects of Berlin's work miss something important. There is a tendency, when discussing the thought of any philosopher, to focus on the logical at the expense of the psychological, the conceptual at the expense of the emotional, the formal at the expense of the personal. To try to fit Berlin and his thought, for instance, into the conceptual abstractions of "liberalism" and "pluralism" is to misunderstand Berlin. It is also to fail to heed one of the most vital and useful lessons of a thinker who taught us to beware of the sacrifice of what is human to abstractions, and to attend to the value of what is particular and personal.

Berlin's humanism was "personal" in two ways: it was both a matter of personal conviction and sentiment, and a way of viewing the world that treated individual people – persons – as being of primary importance. The central sentiments that motivated all of Berlin's mature writings was an interest in persons and a commitment to their value. His thought as a whole is best seen as an attempt to defend the worth, freedom and dignity of individual, living, striving, suffering human beings from the "degradation of human personality that we have witnessed in our time"⁵ by totalitarian governments, fanatically dogmatic movements, and simplistic, reductionist explanatory schemes. Against these enemies of human complexity, vitality and variety, Berlin sought to create a greater awareness and appreciation of human beings as free, rich and diverse creatures; to understand human beings, and help them to understand themselves.

information on the literature on Berlin, the reader is referred to Ian Harris' admirably comprehensive "Berlin and His Critics" in *Liberty*, pp. 349–64).

⁵ "European Unity and its Vicissitudes," CTH p. 205.

The approach I have taken in this study, reflecting the concerns that motivate it and the goals at which it aims, is also "personal:" while my main focus is on the content of Berlin's thought articulated in his writings, I have sought with identifying the concerns and commitments, values and vision, which lie behind, and are expressed through, his words.⁶ Although this essay remains a study of Berlin's thought more than of his character, I believe that the former cannot be separated from, or considered without reference to, the other, without grave distortion occurring.

This essay is also "personal" in second sense: though it strives for fidelity to Berlin's thought above all else, it is very definitely written from a very personal point of view, focusing on what I find most appealing in Berlin's thought. Nietzsche once wrote that the truth is like a valley, which may be viewed from multiple points in the hills; standing in different places will render different perspectives, some clearer and more comprehensive, others more limited or distorted, but all of them giving at least a partial glimpse of the same truth. Similarly, Berlin himself declared that "Life may be seen through many windows, none of them necessarily clear or opaque, less or more distorting than any of the others."⁷ I have here chosen what I think is a particularly well-placed perspective in the hills, or a particularly clarifying and illuminating glass, to achieve a better and clearer view of some of the most important, though not necessarily the most noticed, portions of the valley of Berlin's thought. But I make no claim to be able to depict – or even understand – the valley as a whole. Nor would I ever wish to suggest that this window alone is the correct one. Any such claim would clearly be a failure to understand, and learn from, Berlin's life's work.

⁶ For excellent depictions of Berlin's own personality, see Ignatieff, op.cit; Margalit 1995, op.cit; and Noel Annan, "The Don as Magus," in *The Dons*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999 pp. 209–232.

⁷ "Winston Churchill in 1940," PI, p. 4; for mention and explanation of Nietzsche's wonderful metaphor I am most grateful to my friend Mr. Andrew Koss.

B. Overview

In the first part of this essay, I seek to trace some of the historical and emotional origins of what I call Berlin's humanism, focusing on his reactions to the horrors of twentieth century and to the broader intellectual errors that he saw behind these horrors. In the second part I elaborate on the content of Berlin's humanism, and show how it played a vital part in Berlin's thought as a whole. In the third, concluding section, I return to the idea of Berlin's work as "personal" in its concerns and approach, and briefly set out his thoughts on how to approach the study of human experience, especially political theory and intellectual history. I then move beyond interpreting Berlin's work, to a brief consideration of the implications and lessons of his "personal" approach: I argue that one of Berlin's most valuable legacies as a thinker is the invitation that his work extends to "put the person back" into our studies of history and our reflections on politics and ethics. First, however, I consider the delineation of "humanism" that Berlin himself provides in his historical writings.

C. Berlin's Genealogy of Humanism

Berlin occasionally wrote of a distinctively humanist tradition, consisting of "Erasmus and Spinoza, Locke and Montesquieu, Lessing and Diderot" and Mill, devoted to the ideal of "a rich, spontaneous, many-sided, fearless, free, and yet rational, self-directed character.;" it's faith is in "reason, education, self-knowledge, responsibility; above all, self-knowledge."⁸ Elsewhere in his writing, the tradition has undergone a slight change in personnel, becoming "the tradition of Erasmus and Montaigne, Bayle and Fontenelle, Voltaire and Constant, Humboldt and the English philosophic radicals," as well as his hero, the Russian radical Herzen. It is the tradition of

⁸ "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," *Liberty*, pp. 243–4

“those who protest against despotism wherever they find it, not merely in the oppression of priests or kings or dictators, but in the dehumanising effect of those vast cosmologies which minimise the role of the individual, curb his freedom, repress his desire for self-expression, and order him to humble himself before the great laws and institutions of the universe, immovable, omnipotent and everlasting, in whose sight free human choice is but a pathetic illusion.”⁹

However, Berlin often did not present humanism as stemming from such a unified tradition; instead, he was anxious to distinguish humanist elements derived from both the Enlightenment and its Romantic critics.

Berlin was ambivalent about the Enlightenment, which, in his view, bequeathed a divided, even self-contradictory, legacy. On the one hand, the Enlightenment was a humanistic movement, and made a major contribution to the development of the humanist tradition described above. It gave birth to “egalitarian principles and practice,”

a

“revolt against the very notion that human beings should ... be moulded by paternalist or any other authoritarian groups; violent rejection of the notion that men should be manufactured like bricks for social structures designed by, or for the benefit of, some privileged group or leader; the desire for the breaking of chains and throwing off of burdens.”

The humanists of the Enlightenment believed in the importance of studying human beings empirically, cared about their well-being, and hoped to advance their self-knowledge; they were opposed to idolatry, to “the blind worship of some single value or institution ... as something beyond rational criticism or discussion.”¹⁰ As such, they were liberators, and their age was “one of the best and most hopeful episodes in the life of mankind.”¹¹

However, running counter to this was the legacy of the concentration of power and rationalization of everyday life, leading to the creation of

⁹ “A Revolutionary Without Fanaticism,” POI p. 97

¹⁰ “Aldous Huxley,” PI p. 192

¹¹ “The Philosophers of the Enlightenment,” POI p. 52

“new hierarchies of technical experts, ‘engineers of human souls’, deliberate creators and moulders of the ‘new man’ ... the reduction of men to ‘human material’; to the ‘life of the anthill’ ... mechanisation, alienation, dehumanisation of entire societies, manipulated by hidden persuaders; and technocratic and commercial despotism.”¹²

These were the forces against which Berlin’s thought took shape. In looking for an antidote to these aspects of the Enlightenment, Berlin turned to its Romantic critics.

Although Romanticism revolted against the Enlightenment, it had roots in Enlightenment humanism: it took over, from Kant and Rousseau, the belief that “what distinguishes man is his moral autonomy,” that “all dignity, all pride rest upon independence” and all morality on the ability to choose freely between alternatives.¹³

However, as Berlin sought to demonstrate over and over again, the development of ideas is unpredictable and often paradoxical; many avowed champions of liberty have ended by justifying the confinement of men to chains in the name of “true” freedom.¹⁴ Romanticism’s legacy, like the Enlightenment’s, is conflicted. Romanticism has contributed to the morality of motive, a respect for defiance, independence, sincerity, authenticity, warm-hearted idealism, integrity, imagination, intensity of feeling, purity of motive, noble failure, defiance, dissent, resistance against the odds, “the proud, indomitable, untrammelled human will”; it made men stand up proudly for their beliefs, and insisted on the worth of irregularity and uniqueness in human life, of minorities and misfits. It asserted that man is independent and free, that the human essence is the

¹² “General Education,” POI, p. 217

¹³ “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will,” CTH p. 217.

¹⁴ See *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty* (London: Chatto and Windus, and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), passim.

capacity for choice, and that reality is too various and resilient to be confined within comfortable and constricting patterns.¹⁵

As such, Romanticism was “inspiring, audacious, splendid, and sinister too.” Sinister in viewing suffering as somehow ennobling and glorious, thus justifying its infliction and causing men to seek and embrace it; sinister in its application of an aesthetic model to human life, viewing life as a work of art, and human beings as material, a plastic medium to be molded forcibly by “great men.”¹⁶ It led to irrationalism and racism, to an “insane, egomaniacal self-prostration before one’s own true inner essence, one’s private feelings, the composition of one’s own blood, the shape of one’s own skull, the place of one’s birth, as against that which one shares with other people – reason, universal values, a sense of the community of mankind,” to a denial of common humanity, the assumption that is the essence of humanism.¹⁷

This account is significant to our purposes, because Berlin’s judgments on what is valuable, and what sinister, in Romanticism are made from a decidedly humanist perspective. To the extent that Romanticism led to anti-humanism and inhumanity, to irrationalism, fanaticism and violence, to the devaluing and mistreating and harming of human beings, it has been a dangerous, nightmarish force. But it also had a humanistic side. It was this – what Berlin himself called “Romantic Humanism” – that Berlin found most valuable about Romanticism, and which he was concerned with bringing out.

At the heart of this “Romantic humanism” was a picture of man as an autonomous being:

¹⁵ “European Unity and its Vicissitudes,” CTH pp. 192–3, 200–1; “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will,” CTH pp. 207–8, 215–16; cf. “Herder and the Enlightenment,” PSM pp. 376–8, 392, 400

¹⁶ “European Unity and its Vicissitudes,” CTH p. 193

¹⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 197–8, 179

“the glory and dignity of man consist in the fact that it is he who chooses, and is not chosen for ... that he is not compelled to purchase security and tranquility at the price of letting himself be fitted into a neat pigeon-hole in a totalitarian structure which contrives to rob him of responsibility, freedom and respect both for himself and others, at one single stroke.”¹⁸

For the Romantics, man is himself the maker of his values, and therefore is himself primary, and inviolable: man may not be slaughtered in the name of anything higher than himself, because there is nothing higher – men are ends in themselves, not means to higher ends. Furthermore, “institutions are made not only by, but also for, men, and when they no longer serve him they must go.” It is wrong to slaughter men “in the name of abstract ideas, however lofty ... or of institutions, for none of these have any absolute value in themselves, inasmuch as all that they have has been conferred upon them by men, who alone can make things valuable or sacred.”¹⁹

All of these beliefs – the importance of choice and freedom, the primacy and inviolability of human beings, the belief that institutions and ideas should serve people (not vice versa), and should be judged in terms of how well they do so, and the opposition to all attempts to fit or force human beings into patterns, to sacrifice them to abstractions – were the core of Berlin’s own moral outlook, to which we may now, at last, turn.

I. PERSONAL PREDICAMENTS, PASSIONATE PLEAS: THE DARK ROOTS OF BERLIN’S HUMANISM

*“All central beliefs on human matters spring from a personal predicament”*²⁰

A. Berlin’s Nightmare Vision

“It is always a significant question to ask of any philosopher: what is he afraid of?” – Iris Murdoch.²¹

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 202

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 199

²⁰ Berlin, letter to Jean Floud, 5 July 1968; thanks to Henry Hardy for allowing me to see portions of Berlin’s correspondence.

²¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*. New York: Schocken, 1971, p. 72

Isaiah Berlin led a remarkably happy life, a fact that always surprised him. And yet, behind the luxurious, self-assured cadences of his writing, behind the delighted and delightful flow of his conversation, behind the life of an Anglo-Jewish intellectual grandee which he conducted with such benevolence and relish, lay a subterranean current of sorrow and anxiety.²² Berlin was a liberal, an intellectual, a man deeply devoted to humane values, to decency, justice, kindness, knowledge, and liberty, a moral and in some ways intellectual carry-over from what was best and least brutal in the 19th century. He was also a Jew. That he survived at all was a triumph against the gales of history. That, somewhere within his eminently civilized and gently ironic mind, lurked the outlook of a survivor was a condition of his good fortune. To fail to notice this inner melody of melancholy – and of spirited and determined opposition to that which he most feared – is to fundamentally misunderstand both the origins and orientation of Berlin's work, and its quality.²³ As Joseph Brodsky observed, Berlin's work was

“more the product of a gut reaction against an atrocious century than a philosophical tract ... To me, his words were always a cry from the bowels of the monster, a call not so much for help as *of* help – a normal response of the mind singed and scarred by the present, and wishing it upon nobody as the future.”²⁴

The personal and historical roots of Berlin's commitments are easy to locate. His witnessing of a tsarist policeman being dragged to probable death during the Russian

²² For Berlin's surprised delight in his life, and some of the difficulties he nevertheless had to withstand, see Ignatieff, p. 301 and *passim*. Berlin's letters also throw much surprising and enriching light on the personal predicament behind Berlin's public persona, and reveal Berlin in all of his troubled, flawed and ultimately touching and admirable humanity; for this, and for many other reasons, their publication is to be eagerly anticipated.

²³ One author who has written about what he calls Berlin's "melancholy" is Ira Katznelson, "Isaiah Berlin's Modernity," in Mack, ed., *Social Research*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1079–80.

²⁴ Joseph Brodsky, "Isaiah Berlin: A Tribute," in Avishai Margalit and Edna Ullmann-Margalit, eds. *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration* (London: The Hogarth Press, and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 211

Revolution, followed by the experience of the rise of totalitarianism in the 1930s, and later his meeting with surviving members of the Russian intelligentsia and firsthand observation of the effects of Stalinism, left Berlin with an acute awareness of human cruelty and suffering.²⁵ Less traumatizing and visceral, but also significant, were his encounters with positivism (Logical and otherwise) and Marxism, as well as his exposure to the reductive systems and ideologies of the 18th and 19th centuries.²⁶

The first evidence of how Berlin had been affected by his childhood experience of the Russian Revolution, and the first statement of what would be his driving moral concerns for the remainder of his life, is a story that he wrote at the age of 12 as a recently-arrived immigrant schoolboy in England, which contains this portrait of the Bolshevik secret police leader Uritsky:

“He possessed a clever but also cruel look and all his countenance bore the expression of a fanatic. He signed death verdicts without moving his eyebrow. His leading motto in life was ‘The purpose justifies the ways.’ He did not stop before anything for bringing out his plans ... He divided manhood into two classes: first class, people that stood in his way; second, the people who obeyed him.”²⁷

²⁵ See Berlin, “Meetings with Russian Writers,” in PI, passim; *Conversations*, p. 4, and Ignatieff, pp. 24 (on the Russian Revolution), 54–6 (on the 1930s), 136–69 (Berlin’s meetings with Russian intellectuals); also Berlin’s letters to Conor Cruise O’Brien published in O’Brien, *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke* (Chicago, 1992: University of Chicago Press), p. 615 (on the 1930s). For particularly perverse commentary on the incident with the tsarist policeman, see Christopher Hitchens, “Moderation or Death,” *The London Review of Books* 23 November 1998, pp. 3–11; and Brian Barry, “Isaiah, Israel and Tribal Realism,” *TLS* 7 November 2001, pp. 6–7; in both cases, a failure to understand or take seriously this incident is indicative of a larger unwillingness to grapple with Berlin’s experiences and concerns.

²⁶ The importance of these early intellectual encounters can be seen from Berlin’s essay “Some Procrustations,” *Oxford Outlook* 10 (1930), 491–502, which is concerned not with political ideologies, but with then–contemporary (and now largely forgotten) philosophical and artistic doctrines that sought to interpret the varied facets of reality in light of a single principle.

²⁷ “The Purpose Justifies the Ways,” *Liberty* p. 334

Uritsky and his more prominent and effective soul-mates – Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, and all the other armed prophets seeking to save mankind by slaughtering large numbers of men and women –were presences that haunted and dominated Berlin’s political and moral vision. The positions that would be developed and deployed over the next 75 years of Berlin’s lifetime were, to a very large extent, a reaction to the evil that he saw and sketched in faltering English as a 12-year-old child.

Berlin famously divided thinkers into hedgehogs and foxes: those who saw everything as part of, and sought to relate everything to, one big thing, and those who accepted reality as consisting of many different, separate things. A parallel distinction may be made between those who fear variety, confusion, division, conflict, untidiness, uncertainty; and those who fear unity, uniformity, unanimity, conformity, tidiness, symmetry, certainty, and finality. Berlin was of the latter group. His nightmare vision was of a “fanatically tidy world of human beings joyfully engaged in fulfilling their functions, each within his own rigorously defined province, in [a] rationally ordered, totally unalterable hierarchy of the perfect society;”²⁸ of human beings buffeted by forces beyond their control, reduced to obedient, unthinking creatures in the hands of others, unable to will or choose; of the loss of individuality, whether this is violent, or brought about in more benign and clinical ways – the reduction of men to an undifferentiated mass; of human beings cooped up, confined and constricted within ideological prisons, without room to move or breath spiritually, intellectually or emotionally; and of their masters, devoid of pity or respect towards them, manipulating individuals and masses without their consent or knowledge, and laughing at them in their helplessness.

²⁸ “Historical Inevitability,” PSM pp. 137

B. "The Sacrifice of Human Beings on the Altar of Abstractions": Fanaticism, Dehumanization, Reification

"... the terrible power over human lives of ideological abstractions"²⁹

Of the many images that recur throughout Berlin's writings, none is more insistent or grim than that of human beings being sacrificed upon the altars of abstractions.³⁰ Berlin opened what he regarded as his most important book, *Four Essays on Liberty*, with these words of Benjamin Constant: "Real beings are sacrificed to an abstraction; individual people are offered up in a holocaust to people as a collectivity;"³¹ and he often harkened back to the use of the same metaphor in his discussion of his intellectual hero Herzen, and in his expositions of his own most deeply-held views.³² This image represents a major part of Berlin's perception of the terrible age through which, and the brutal world in which, he was living; it embodies a major part of what he found most awful to witness in history, and most nightmarish to contemplate in his mind's eye.

Part of the problem with sacrificing individuals to abstractions is the dubious nature of those abstractions. There is a danger inherent in the invocation of "general formulas as such ... principles and slogans in the name of which men ... [are] violated and slaughtered, and their forms of life condemned and destroyed."³³ Berlin hated "the

²⁹ Berlin, "Alexander Herzen," RT p. 193

³⁰See. e.g., "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberty* p. 212, among many other invocations of the image. Oddly, given Berlin's own emphasis on the importance of interpreting such recurrent, controlling images in understanding thinkers, and the wealth and vividness of Berlin's own metaphorical imagination, there has not been a full-scale attempt to study Berlin's thought through the images and figures that he deployed.

³¹ *Liberty*, p. 3, n1; quoted from Benjamin Constant de Rebeque, *De L'esprit de conquete et de l'usupation dans leur rapports avec la civilisation European*, Part I Chapter 13, "De l'uniformite."

³² E.g. "The Pursuit of the Ideal," CTH p. 16, as well as the passages quoted at length, below.

³³ "Herzen and His Memoirs," AC p.196

despotism of formulas – the submission of human beings to arrangements arrived at by deduction from some kind of *a priori* principles which had no foundations in actual experience."³⁴ Such faith in abstract formulas was an intellectual weakness, a psychological flaw, even a moral vice. It was based on a basic, pervasive and delusive intellectual error,

“the confusion of words with facts, the construction of theories employing abstract terms which are not founded on discovered real needs ... These formulas grow into terrible weapons in the hands of fanatical doctrinaires who seek to bind them upon human beings, if need be, by violent vivisection, for the sake of some absolute ideal, for which the sanction lies in some uncriticised and uncriticisable vision.”³⁵

This was a form of superstition: in Herzen’s words, “The submission of the individual to society – to the people – to humanity – to the idea – is a continuation of human sacrifice ... the crucifixion of the innocent for the guilty”; it was the individual who was the “true, real monad of society,” and not the fantasies to which individuals have always been fed.³⁶

These theoretical abstractions do not really exist, but are attempts to evade the uncomfortable facts that do not fit into our preconceived schema; they become idols, fetishes, crushing, blinding icons which justify excessive crimes.

Berlin was skeptical about “the meaning and value of abstract ideas as such, in contrast with the concrete, short-term, immediate goals of identifiable living individuals.”³⁷ The abstractions to which people were being sacrificed were chimeras, bloody illusions which made the suffering caused in their name a pathetic mockery. What was real – all that we can know for certain – was the suffering that these fantasies caused, “the reality of the sacrifice, the dying and the dead.”³⁸

³⁴ “Alexander Herzen,” RT p. 200

³⁵ “Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty,” RT p. 89

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ “Herzen and His Memoirs,” AC p. 196

³⁸ “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” CTH p. 16.

That the abstractions were mirages, and killing people in their name thus an error, was appalling; but not as appalling as the violence itself. Killing people in the name of big ideas was deranged and futile because the ideas didn't really exist; but it was immoral because the people really did.

Real, living, breathing, human beings were of primary importance to Berlin; the great evil of abstractions is that they blind us to what is real, to the paramount importance and value of individual human beings. Berlin believed that the "fanaticism of ideas" went "hand in hand with lack of respect for persons," with contempt by people for their own neighbors. The worship of abstract idols leads to the sacrifice of real human liberty and life to "mere words which inflame the passions, and which, upon being pressed for their meaning, turn out to refer to nothing," but which have plunged the world "into inhuman and unnecessary slaughter."³⁹

Berlin was especially bothered by three forms of sacrificing individuals to abstractions, which he regarded as particularly prevalent in his time. One is to exclude some human beings from the pale of humanity. Another is to sacrifice those who are regarded as weak or misguided, whose beliefs and efforts are seen as futile and irrational and not deserving of respect – lone, quixotic individuals, unpopular minorities who are crushed by what Berlin called the "big battalions." The third is to sacrifice human beings in the name of some goal that lies ahead – to justify misery in the present for the sake of a glorious future.

For Berlin, following his hero Herzen,

"The purpose of the struggle for liberty is not liberty tomorrow, it is liberty today, the liberty of living individuals with their own individual ends, the ends for which they move and fight and perhaps die, ends which are sacred to them. To crush their freedom, their pursuits, to ruin their ends for the sake of some vague felicity in the future which cannot be guaranteed, about which we know nothing, which is simply the product of some enormous metaphysical construction that itself rests upon sand ... is in the first place blind, because

³⁹ "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty," RT p. 89

the future is uncertain; and in the second place vicious, because it offends against the only moral values we know ... one of the greatest sins that any human being can perpetrate is to seek to transfer moral responsibility from his own shoulders to those of an unpredictable future order."⁴⁰

This sacrifice of the present to the future, of the real to the (at best) potential, was based on a particular vision of history, which also underlay the "big battalions" fallacy. In this view, history is governed by incontrovertible laws; the mass of men are swept along by the wave of historical necessity; and those individuals who refuse to accompany them must be drowned or crushed. This vision of history, and the consequent practice of identifying with history, of thinking that the course of history, being real and thus rational, "must be applauded as such;" or of identifying history with one's own wishes, and seeking to crush other human beings in the name of historical inevitability – these are at once ways of escaping "the burden of moral choice," and justifying treating other, dissenting, obstructive human beings in ways that would otherwise be unjustifiable.⁴¹

Berlin rejected this doctrine as, firstly, false, because we do not, and probably cannot, know the course of history; and also as immoral, since it is used to justify cruelty, fanaticism, the most violent and repressive intolerance. But he also reacted against it particularly strongly because of the contempt that it shows towards dissent, towards minorities, eccentrics, individualists, those who go "against the current," with whom Berlin naturally identified: his sympathies were "with the victims, never the oppressors."⁴² This was what was at stake in one of the few protracted public polemics in which Berlin indulged: his decade-long campaign of sniping with the Marxist, "realist" historian E.H. Carr.

⁴⁰ "Alexander Herzen," RT pp. 197–8

⁴¹ "A Letter to George Kennan," *Liberty*, pp. 340–1

⁴² "Fathers and Children," RT p. 294

Berlin objected to Carr's view of history as "a procession of events ruled by inexorable laws, which only a fool or a madman would try to ignore or resist or deflect." Following Hegel and Marx, Carr suggested that "there is something childish or capricious or quixotic in approving or deploring the consequences of these laws." For Carr the proper task of a rational man "is to adjust himself to the great pattern;" while the historian's duty is "to make clear the direction pursued by the central stream of history ... without so much as a backward glance at unrealized possibilities upon which great hopes and fears had once been focused, still less upon the victims and casualties of the process."⁴³ In Carr's work on the Russian Revolution the victims are not allowed to testify; they are

"feeble flotsam adequately taken care of by history which has swept them away as, being against the current, they, *eo ipso*, deserve. Only the victors deserve to be heard; the rest ... all the critics and casualties of Deutschtom or White Man's Burdens, or the American Century, or the Common Man on the March – these are historical dust ... poor little rats ... Surely there never was a time when more homage was paid to bullies as such: and the weaker the victim the louder (and sincerer) his paeans ..."⁴⁴

This dismissal of large groups of human beings as the "flotsam of history" was one example of a larger phenomenon: the division, whether by Communists or Nazis, of humanity into different groups who shared nothing, who had no responsibilities or duties towards, and nothing to say to, one another. This is based on the idea that some groups of men are chosen while others are "expendable": "their destruction can neither be averted nor regretted by a rational being ... the road to the gates of paradise is necessarily strewn with corpses." Mankind is divided into two groups, "men proper, and some other, lower, order of beings, inferior races, inferior cultures, subhuman species, nations or

⁴³ "Soviet Beginnings," (Review of Carr's *A History of Soviet Russia, Volume I: The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917–1923*) *Sunday Times*, 10 Dec 1950, p. 3. See also Berlin's review of Carr's *What is History?*, "Mr. Carr's Big Battalions," *New Statesman* 63 (January–June 1962), pp. 15–16.

⁴⁴"A Letter to George Kennan," *Liberty* p. 343. For a similar denunciation, applied to the bigger game of Hegel and Marx, see "Historical Inevitability," PSM pp. 138–9

classes condemned by history." This attitude allows men "to look on many millions of their fellow men as not quite human, to slaughter them without a qualm of conscience, without the need to try to save them or warn them."⁴⁵

Although this evil came from a different ideological source than the rationalist subjugation of individuals to systems, it was based on a similar presumption to know the truth. As Berlin wrote:

"Few things have done more harm than the belief on the part of individuals or groups ... that he or she or they are in *sole* possession of the truth; especially about how to live, what to be & do – & that those who differ from them are not merely mistaken, but wicked or mad: & need restraining or suppressing. It is a terrible and dangerous arrogance to believe that you alone are right: have a magical eye which sees *the* truth; and that others cannot be right if they disagree. This makes one certain that there is *one* goal and one only for one's nation or church or for the whole of humanity & that it is worth any amount of suffering (particularly on the part of other people) if only the goal is attained ... nothing is more destructive than a happy sense of one's own – or one's nation's – infallibility which lets you destroy others with a quiet conscience because you are doing God's ... or the superior race's ... or History's ... work."⁴⁶

In denying the humanity of others, such fanatics lose all sense of what it is to be human.⁴⁷

Berlin was always against sacrificing the "freedom of individuals to some huge abstraction – some monstrosity invented by metaphysics or religion," and escaping "the real, earthly issues." He was opposed to "cynical indifference to the fate of individual human beings ... childish enthusiasm for playing with human lives for the sake of social experiment."⁴⁸ No appeal to distant goals, or overriding principles, or abstract nouns justified fraud, violence, tyranny, or any other violation of the liberty and dignity and safety of individuals.

⁴⁵ "European Unity and its Vicissitudes," CTH pp. 179–80

⁴⁶ "Notes on Prejudice," *Liberty* pp. 345–6

⁴⁷ "The Pursuit of the Ideal," CTH p. 14

⁴⁸ "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty," RT p. 103

C. Against Procrustes and Pangloss: Berlin's Assault on Reductionism and Theodicy

"... obsessive ideas, ethical doctrines not fitted to the chaos of life."⁴⁹

What was true on a practical level was also true on an intellectual one: as people's lives must not be sacrificed to the terrorism of fanatical ideologies, so their identities, their complexity and dignity as individuals, should not be subjugated to the tyranny of systematic and reductionist theories. What is living should not be killed for what does not exist; what is true should not be denied in the name of false figments of the human mind. This brings us to what Jonathan Allen calls Berlin's anti-Procrusteanism.⁵⁰ If Berlin's opposition to sacrificing human life to abstractions was at the core of his moral and political commitments, his opposition to Procrusteanism – the forcing of reality, and especially human experience, into "the neat uniforms demanded by dogmatically believed-in schemes"⁵¹ – was his galvanizing intellectual concern. At the heart of both the intellectual errors and political horrors which most exercised Berlin were "the *a priori* barbarities of Procrustes – the vivisection of actual human societies into some fixed pattern dictated by our infallible understanding of a largely imaginary past or a wholly imaginary future."⁵²

The belief that human beings are naturally dependent on the use of mental constructions in making sense of the world, and that the use of such models is inseparable from thinking, was central to Berlin's thought. All language, all thought, is necessarily "metaphorical": we can only make sense of things by relating them to, and comparing them with, other things.⁵³

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 202

⁵⁰ See Allen, *op.cit.*

⁵¹ "The Pursuit of the Ideal," CTH p. 19

⁵² "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberty*, p. 216

⁵³ "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" PSM pp. 75–77

Yet to employ or deploy metaphors and models is fraught with intellectual dangers. We may misapply models, make connections and comparisons between things that are wholly separate and, and try to treat things that are actually very different as if they were essentially the same: "Few things have played a more fatal part in the history of human thought and action than great imaginative analogies from one sphere, in which a particular principle is applicable and valid, to other provinces ... where its consequences may be fallacious in theory and ruinous in practice."⁵⁴ The greatest danger is that we will believe that one model fits all phenomena – and then warp and distort our perceptions, and sometimes the phenomena themselves, to fit the single model. This is the ancient error of the "Ionian fallacy": to believe that what applies to one sector of life applies to all sectors, that one answer, one model, fits all questions, all facets of existence.⁵⁵ The universal application of a simile or metaphor, the taking of it for the truth rather than a conceptual tool for considering and trying to understand the truth, often involves ignoring what we know directly of human nature, "and therefore ... [does] violence to what we are, or what we know, by forcing it into a Procrustean bed of some rigid dogma", and against this "we protest in the name of our own view of what men are, have been, could be."⁵⁶

Reality is too complex, its aspects and convolutions are too many, minute, fleeting, blurred, intricately inter-connected, to be prised apart and pinned down, classified and fitted into neat compartments, or subsumed under a single, unified, dominant model.⁵⁷ Berlin was convinced that "the application of some general rule to a

⁵⁴ "European Unity and its Vicissitudes," CTH p. 197; see also "Historical Inevitability," PSM pp. 131–2

⁵⁵ "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" PSM p. 76.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 77; see also "A Letter to George Kennan," *Liberty* p. 342

⁵⁷ "The Concept of Scientific History," PSM p. 34

concrete situation for which it was not made" was an error, an example of foolishness, even dishonesty.⁵⁸

But Procrusteanism was not merely an intellectual error: Procrustes was noted not for the misapplication of models or the misunderstanding of metaphors, but for lopping off or stretching out the limbs of living human beings. This is what gives the image of Procrustes its horror, and its vital importance in matters of morality – which were always central to Berlin.⁵⁹ Indeed, so vehement was Berlin's opposition to this particular form of human sacrifice, that he asserted that "the worst of all sins is to degrade or humiliate human beings for the sake of some Procrustean pattern into which they are to be forced against their wills."⁶⁰

In addition to providing a motivation for violence, intolerance and coercive social engineering on a grand scale, Procrusteanism also led to psychological distortion and malformation. Procrusteanism seeks to create a new reality, which, as Yehoshua Arieli has acutely noted, "tends to dehumanize human experience and create uniformities. For the spontaneous emergence of countless expressions of human endeavour, it substitutes a unifying framework of personal, social and political life in which the individual is no

⁵⁸ "The Life and Opinions of Moses Hess," AC pp. 250–1

⁵⁹ Contra the claim of George Kateb that Berlin was an "aesthete" who was less concerned with issues of morality or truth, or the treatment of individual human beings, than the value of cultures or "ways of life" as aesthetic objects, in "Can Cultures Be Judged? Two Defenses of Cultural Pluralism in Isaiah Berlin's Work," in Mack, ed., *Social Research*, op.cit. My reading of Berlin here is, clearly, diametrically opposed to Kateb's. Which interpretation does greater justice to, and is more firmly founded on, the evidence of Berlin's writings and the reality of Berlin's life-long commitments I leave to the concerned reader to decide.

⁶⁰ "European Unity and its Vicissitudes," CTH p. 199.

more than a unit within a mass."⁶¹ For this reason, there is something sinister about symmetry as such.

There is a certain tension within Berlin's writings on this matter: sometimes he treats such attempts to mould human beings as doomed to failure, because there is something in human beings that is resistant, which will always rebel. At other times, Berlin's writings betray a fear that such attempts will be all too successful. By redefining human nature, oppressors can justify their oppression and convince their victims to accept it: "Enough manipulation of the definition of man, and freedom can be made to mean whatever the manipulator wishes."⁶²

Even if we can remake human beings, we must not: "we may not suppress or stifle: for that is ... tantamount to collective moral and intellectual suicide."⁶³ At the core of Berlin's view of human nature and human morality is the conviction that it is wrong to try to simplify people's personalities and needs, or make them simplify themselves. He often quoted, and often echoed, Turgenev's statement about his tragic character in *Virgin Soil* who "cannot simplify himself."⁶⁴ For Berlin, individual character was something irreducible, sacrosanct; to try to twist or constrict it, to deny or be ashamed of one's own character, or try to intolerantly or contemptuously crush or forcibly alter the characters of others, was terrible. There is never

"any duty to maim or impoverish oneself for the sake of an abstract ideal ... nobody can, or should, be required to vivisect himself, ... to sacrifice his own individual pattern of the unanalysable relationships – the central emotional or intellectual

⁶¹ Arieli, op.cit., p. 23. It has been argued that the essence of totalitarianism, terrorism and genocide, is to transform or re-construct reality – a convincing view, with which I am very grateful to Mr. David Marcus for acquainting me.

⁶² "Two Concepts of Liberty," *Liberty*, p. 181

⁶³ "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," in *Liberty*, p. 229

⁶⁴ "Fathers and Children," RT p. 290; cf, among many other similar phrases, Berlin's admiring remark that Weizmann "could not break his own temperament," "Chaim Weizmann," PI p. 56

experiences – of which human lives are compounded, to offer them up ... for the sake of some tidy solution, deduced from abstract and impersonal premises.”⁶⁵

The horror of maiming and constricting character – of denying people their dignity and autonomy as individuals, is clear. It is less obvious that denial, or simple blindness, is a great evil. And yet Berlin insisted that it was: his attacks on Procrusteanism have to do not just with its tendency to lead to inhumane behavior, but to the denial of what is real. For “to deny what inwardly one knows to be true, to do violence to the facts for whatever tactical or doctrinal motive, is at once degrading and doomed to futility.”⁶⁶ If something does not fit into a particular model or formula, one must

“not ignore, escape, forget it; adjust, arrange, add a patch or two ... If the shoe does not fit it is no use saying that time and wear will make it less uncomfortable, or that the shape of the foot should be altered, or that the pain is an illusion – that reality is harmonious, and that therefore conflict, injustice, barbarism belong to the order of appearances, which superior spirits should rise above ... no theory [is] valid which ignore[s] any part of direct human experience”⁶⁷

This opposition, not only to the inhumanity, but to the fundamental moral falsity, of Procrusteanism – a falsity that deluded human hopes, and demeaned human character – was the seed out of which Berlin’s pluralism grew.

Another intellectual error which evoked Berlin’s indignation was theodicy – the attempt, originally religious but secularized in the modern age, to justify the sad tableau of suffering and confusion presented by history and daily life, the stubborn belief that all is well or will work out well, that tragedy and loss are temporary or illusory and that human life and the will of God or the Universe are governed by harmony, benevolence, justice.⁶⁸ Berlin denounced the theodical arguments that all that is, is best, and that to understand things is ultimately to understand why they must be as they are, and therefore

⁶⁵ “The Life and Opinions of Moses Hess,” AC pp. 250–1

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ “Einstein and Israel,” PI p. 72

⁶⁸ For an eloquent description of Berlin’s thought as anti-theodic, see Gray, *op.cit.*, p.

justify them, as "*ringing fallacies ... which have led to special pleading and, indeed, obfuscation of the issue on a heroic scale.*"⁶⁹

Berlin's anti-theodicy and his humanism are relevant, and indeed important, to one another in three ways. First, Berlin's anti-theodicy informed the sort of humanism that he embraced and expounded: a tragic humanism, shorn of the optimism that had characterized most identifiably humanist thought from Pico on. Berlin's reasons for differing and dissenting from the Enlightenment were many; but at the core of his ambivalent apostasy from the movement which had, after all, given voice to his own hopes for humanity, was a disapproving revulsion at its serene optimism and its humane but hubristic ambitions. Berlin's inability to swallow the seductive palaver of theodicy was thus an important force in the formation of his own humanism.

On the other hand, the opposition to theodicy and cosmic optimism was itself based on two aspects of Berlin's humanism. The first was his perception of human beings and human life as too complex to admit of such easy solutions, or indeed any solutions at all. Central human problems are central by the very virtue of the fact that they are insoluble; "it is a vulgarity and, at times, a crime to believe that permanent solutions are always possible."⁷⁰ Conflict and loss, and therefore suffering and tragedy, are endemic to human life and human nature: "The collisions of values are of the essence of what they are and what we are ... We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss."⁷¹

There is thus no possibility of some Hegelian sublimation of conflict on some higher level; the ideas of harmony, of Utopia, of paradise itself, are incoherent and untrue to our existence. Such harmonization would require a change, a transformation, in either our

⁶⁹ "Historical Inevitability," PSM p. 119

⁷⁰ "Alexander Herzen," RT pp. 201–2

⁷¹ "The Pursuit of the Ideal," CTH p. 13

values, or in us; if values are harmonized, if they are transformed, "it is into conceptions not known to us on earth. But it is on earth that we live, and it is here that we must believe and act." But even if such a transformation could occur, it would be "poor comfort to those who are agonized by dilemmas" flowing from the tragic conflict among human values.⁷²

This brings us to the final way in which Berlin's humanism and anti-theodicy are connected. Berlin was vehemently opposed to theodicy, and denounced it with a heat that was perhaps not deserved by mere error, because he perceived it as another failure to recognize humanity, another abstraction which justified dismissing the seriousness of torture, slaughter, and agony, after the fact.

D. "I Object to Being Treated as a Child": Against Manipulation and Paternalism

To sacrifice human beings to abstract ideals is ghastly; to try to squeeze them into the boundaries, whether mental or physical, prescribed by *a priori* assumptions or misapplied models is blind and brutal. But there is another evil, another way of devaluing and dehumanizing people which makes their lives and personalities seem worthless, which is in some ways more horrible, because it seems more benign or innocuous and is in fact more pervasive. This is to treat human beings as children who must be taught, or as material that must be managed, or as patients who must be cured.

What most haunted Berlin's thought and work throughout the late 1940s and early-to-mid 1950s, and continued to recur more subtly ever thereafter, was the special horror occasioned by the violation of human beings' last lines of defense, robbing them of their dignity until they themselves feel that they really are material –

⁷² *ibid.*

or don't even realize that they are being treated and viewed, and view themselves and act, as such.

This emerges most strikingly in a remarkable letter that Berlin wrote to the American diplomat George Kennan, responding to Kennan's comments on Berlin's article "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century" in 1951. Berlin wrote that Kennan's letter to him had identified the central moral issue of the time, the most heinous act possible: "the deliberate act of tampering with human beings so as to make them behave in a way which, if they knew what they were doing, or what its consequences were likely to be, would make them recoil with horror and disgust."⁷³ In one of the most remarkably impassioned passages in his writings, Berlin wrote that what "turns one inside out, and is indescribable" about Soviet and Nazi practice is "the spectacle of one set of persons who so tamper and 'get at' others that the others do their will without knowing what they are doing; and in this lose their status as free human beings, indeed as human beings at all."⁷⁴

For example (and this is one of Berlin's few direct discussions of the Holocaust), the Nazis, when they loaded their victims into trains bound for the gas chambers, would often tell them that they were going to a happier place. This may well have actually diminished the torments of their victims; but "The spectacle ... of victims marching off in happy ignorance of their doom amid the smiling faces of their tormentors" arouses "a really unutterable horror" in Berlin, because he cannot bear

"the thought of human beings denied their last rights – of knowing the truth, of acting with at least the freedom of the condemned, of being able to face their destruction with fear or courage, according to their temperaments, *but at least as human beings*, armed with the power of choice. It is the denial to human beings of the possibility of choice, the getting them into one's power, the twisting them this way and that in accordance with one's whim, the *destruction of their personality* by creating unequal moral terms between the gaoler and the victim, whereby the gaoler knows what he is doing, and why, and *plays upon the victim*, i.e. treats him as a mere object and not as a subject whose motives, views, intentions have any intrinsic weight whatever

⁷³ "A Letter to George Kennan", *Liberty*, p. 337

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 339

– by destroying the very possibility of his having views, notions of a relevant kind – that is what cannot be borne at all."⁷⁵

What the Nazis did was particularly evil not merely because it was cruel – though it was certainly that – but because it was also utterly dehumanizing; it so “got at” the victims that they ceased to have any worth, any common ground with their tormenters, both in the Nazis’ eyes and even in their own.⁷⁶ It led to the ultimate horror, a horror implicit in the sacrifice of men to abstractions or the fitting of men into Procrustean schemes, but which was made most complete in this sort of manipulation: it turned men into non-men, into material, into *things*. It was, further, a sin against the victims’ right to know, their right to live, and die, with their eyes open. The idea of being manipulated, of being laughed at behind one’s back, of becoming a plaything in the hands of others, has a special horror, because it violates something very precious. This precious thing is human dignity.

Berlin’s conception of human dignity was deeply influenced by his reading of Kant and the Romantics. For Kant exploitation was evil because it meant using human beings “as means to ends that are not their own, but those of the manipulator, the treatment of free beings as if they were things, tools, the deliberate denial of their humanity.”⁷⁷ This sort of subjugation involved a “particular form of inequality” whereby some human beings, whether by persuasion, or coercion, “or something in between,” made other human beings pursue courses of which they are not aware, in which they have no say, no choice or control.⁷⁸ Against this Kant issues a “passionate plea for self-determination, insistence on the development of moral freedom, even if it leads to suffering and martyrdom;” from this plea came the

⁷⁵ *ibid.*; emphasis added.

⁷⁶ The greatest statement of what this dehumanization was like from a victim’s point of view that I know of is Primo Levi’s incomparable *Survival at Auschwitz*, which was, significantly, originally titled *If This is a Man*.

⁷⁷ “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will,” CTH p. 222

⁷⁸ “Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Nationalism,” SR pp. 238–9

“terminology of exploitation, degradation, humiliation, dehumanization and, as against this, the ideals of social or economic or individual emancipation of workers or women or artists or oppressed groups or nationalities – the entire language of liberal and socialist ideology, in the last two centuries.”⁷⁹

While the sort of dehumanization and depredation perpetrated by the Nazis was clearly and utterly evil, Berlin was also wary of the far less drastic and cruel ways of getting at people, which, though not carried out with such malignant intent and not resulting in such indescribable torment, nevertheless also resulted in the loss of dignity, and which were becoming increasingly pervasive, even in free societies.

Berlin feared the rising tide of paternalism, which could often be benevolent, and was often motivated by – or, at least, rationalized through the invocation of – humanitarian impulses. Paternalism, Berlin said, is based on the following reasoning:

“Human beings are children. We must first herd them together, create certain institutions, make them obey orders, and we hope later they will see how well we’ve done for them, and they will become rational ...’ This is exactly what the British Empire felt towards coloured people in Africa, it’s exactly what schoolmasters feel towards children, and it always leads to bad consequences in the end. It’s quite honourable.”

It is also quite humiliating, and quite dangerous, because it ultimately leads to subjugation.⁸⁰ Berlin was clearly impressed by, and seems to have agreed with, Kant’s declaration that “‘a *paternalist government*’, based on the benevolence of a ruler who treats his subjects ‘as dependent children ... is the greatest conceivable *despotism*’ and ‘destroys all freedom.’”⁸¹

Berlin, of course, objected to the deprivation of liberty, the cruel oppression of people by their “masters.” But, he said,

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ These words are from Berlin’s comments in a televised discussion with J.B. Priestley and A.J. Ayer, “Conversations for Tomorrow,” recorded on 26 March 1964 and broadcast on BBC television on 25 April of the same year. I am grateful to Dr. Henry Hardy for lending me a recording, and providing me with a transcript, of this program.

"I think I object to more than that. I think I object to being treated like a child. I think I object to not being reasoned with. I object to paternalism ... what I object to is being treated like a schoolboy, being told for my own good that there are certain things to do, or being driven in a perfectly beneficent direction by [a] perfectly disinterested, pure-hearted body of – anyone you like, governments or manufacturers – it doesn't matter which – even if you assume that they are pure-hearted men not seeking profit at all."⁸²

For Berlin, it was very important to treat people as rational beings who are able to think and decide one way or another for themselves, to be their own masters, to accord them the status of equals, not to seek to control and deceive them.

Berlin's objection to sacrificing human beings to abstractions – that it both offended against their nature, and was based on a delusion – also applied to the manipulation of people in the name of higher goals. Values are made valuable by human beings: "there is no value higher than the individual." The goals in the name of which individuals are coerced are less ultimate than they are themselves. Therefore, "All forms of tampering with human beings, getting at them, shaping them against their will to your own pattern, all thought-control and conditioning, is ... a denial of that in men which makes them men and their values ultimate."⁸³

For this reason, Berlin was not only a passionate anti-totalitarian: he was also passionately and consistently opposed to imperialism or colonialism,⁸⁴ and the new therapeutic and technocratic tendencies within advanced and basically liberal Western societies that accompanied the growth of the welfare state. Berlin shared Mill's fears of "organisation men," of the artificial narrowing of human ends and human character that

⁸¹ "Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Nationalism," SR p. 237; cf. "Two Concepts of Liberty," *Liberty* pp. 183–4

⁸² "Conversations for Tomorrow"

⁸³ "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberty* p. 184

⁸⁴ Another feature of Berlin's thought, which is closely tied to his humanism and liberalism, and which has been too little emphasized by commentators (especially his left-wing critics), is the staunch anti-imperialism that pervades his writings about paternalism.

led to "collective mediocrity" – a danger that seemed increasingly real in the 1950s.⁸⁵ He distrusted the authority of "all the great managers of society, all those who confidently and tidily arrange the destinies of others." The enforcement of any orthodoxy, even if it is virtuous, even if it is self-inflicted, was in his view to be opposed as such; there was something distinctly chilling and repulsive in the effort to turn all human conflicts and needs into problems to be solved through planning and therapy, in treating human beings as things to be administered.⁸⁶ Berlin found the phrase "human material" sinister, and the sentiment that it reflected deeply dangerous. Soviet totalitarianism was prefaced on precisely this view of human beings, and the view of rulers and educators as "engineers of human souls."⁸⁷ But this view was not restricted to the Soviet Union alone.

Although always a moderate liberal, sympathetic to the goals and admiring of the successes of the New Deal, Berlin anticipated, in the early 1950s, the critique of that decade's soulless and conformist managerial culture that would later, in a far more hysterical form and tied to far less measured and humane political goals, be associated with the New Left. And precisely because he shared their dislike for the paternalistic and technocratic ethos of the times, Berlin was wary of the student movement: for radicals have always had a bad habit of gaining power and becoming repressive. Indeed, even the technocratic paternalism that Berlin perceived and assailed in the post-war period

⁸⁵ "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," *Liberty* p. 228

⁸⁶ "Montesquieu," AC pp. 149, 159. Eloquent and penetrating expressions of Berlin's own aversion to what, speaking in Tolstoy's name but in his own voice, he called "experts, professionals, men who claim special authority over other men," ("Tolstoy and Enlightenment," RT 246) are given by Noal Annan, in the "Introduction" to PI, pp. xvii–xviii, and by Roger Hausheer in the "Introduction" to AC, pp. xlv–xlvi.

⁸⁷ This phrase of Stalin's was a particularly obsessively recurring feature in Berlin's writings of the 1950s, and beyond: it is prominently invoked in "Democracy, Communism and the Individual," "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century," the letter to Kennan, "Philosophy and Government Repression," "The Sense of Reality," Berlin's essays on the Soviet Union, and many other places.

originated with radicals, and was often embraced by the left. Writing of Turgenev's tribulations in his dealings with the young and impatient revolutionaries of his day (a timely topic when Berlin addressed it in 1970), Berlin noted that, ironically, Bazarov, the student radical, the original nihilist, had won. What Bazarov stood for – quantitative method, technological management, reliance on utilitarian calculus in making decisions that affected vast numbers of human beings, "the calm moral arithmetic of cost effectiveness which liberates men from qualms, because they no longer think of the entities to which they apply their scientific computations as actual human beings who live the lives and suffer the deaths of concrete individuals", and, along with it, the suspicion of "all that is qualitative, imprecise, unanalysable, yet precious to men," has become the property of a centrist "technocratic establishment" which "ignore[s] and despise[s] what men are and what they live by."⁸⁸

At the heart of Berlin's liberalism was his opposition to the unique sort of dehumanization and humiliation caused by paternalism, manipulation and exploitation. The "central reason for pursuing liberty in the first place" is that

"all paternalist governments, however benevolent, cautious, disinterested and rational, have tended, in the end, to treat the majority of men as minors, or as being too often incurably foolish or irresponsible ... This is a policy that degrades men, and seems to me to rest on no rational or scientific foundation, but on the contrary, on a profoundly mistaken view of the deepest human needs."⁸⁹

Berlin was no anarchist.⁹⁰ He acknowledged that this fear of paternalism can, and should not, be carried too far: if it were, it would do away with all education, all attempts to impose a truly necessary degree of control on human beings to keep them from

⁸⁸ "Fathers and Children," RT 300–301. Berlin was referring to the political, social and cultural trends of the Cold War period; but his words are remarkably prescient in characterizing much of the study of political science as it is now practiced.

⁸⁹ "Introduction," to *Five* [originally *Four*] *Essays on Liberty* in *Liberty*, p. 54

⁹⁰ I am grateful to my friend Mr. Jacob Remes for making me aware of the need to explain this.

harming themselves and others, to lead them away from their very worst proclivities and make them aware of better ones. There can be no human society without some form of authority or some degree of restraint, some sacrifice of liberty. Human beings are not naturally or necessarily benign; they are prone to error and conflict, and therefore need laws to protect them; without laws human beings will destroy each other, and live in constant strife.⁹¹

Individuals do not, at birth, have the power of choice and the means of understanding the world, and must first be endowed with them. The purpose of education, therefore, is "not an inculcation of obedience but its contrary, the development of power of free judgement and choice."⁹² Education should aim at enabling individuals to be free, not making them obedient, at "teaching men the techniques of *answering for themselves*" the questions that torment them. Individuals must be taught in such a way that they "want to seek the right ends freely, ...not because they were socially or morally conditioned into believing nothing else."⁹³ Human beings

"are in general entitled to have their capacities for thought and feeling developed at the cost of not always (or even often) fitting smoothly into some centrally planned social pattern, however pressing the technological demands of their societies ... public virtues and social peace are not necessarily preferable to, still less identical with, the critical intellect, the unfettered imagination, and a developed capacity for personal relationships and private life."⁹⁴

In trying to educate for liberty rather than conformity, the "how" made all the difference. Trying to "mould" people is always an evil, though in the case of children a

⁹¹ *Conversations*, pp. 149–50

⁹² "A Letter to George Kennan," *Liberty* p. 342

⁹³ "Democracy, Communism and the Individual," [see below] pp. 3–4.

⁹⁴ "General Education," POI p. 216; see also *ibid.*, p. 214. Another excellent and highly characteristic discussion of the aims of education, unfortunately not currently available to the public, is Berlin's essay "Woodrow Wilson on Education", written for publication in the mid-1960s but as yet unpublished.

necessary and indeed inescapable one.⁹⁵ But the method of molding mattered a great deal. It is fine to try to reason with people, fine (and necessary) to instruct children in how to think, how to consider and be considerate; it is even acceptable, when necessary, to prevent people from acting destructively by physically constraining them, when nothing else could be done. What is unacceptable was toying with people, the "getting at them" in humiliating and dehumanizing ways.⁹⁶

E. "The degradation of human personality ... in our time": Isaiah Berlin's Twentieth Century

These moral positions and pronouncements were prompted by the terrors of the twentieth century; and references to these terrors, whether oblique or explicit, abound throughout Berlin's work. In addition to the many writings already cited, Berlin wrote several essays directly dealing with the general ideological and moral experience of the twentieth century, as well as a number of penetrating analyses of contemporary trends throughout the 1950s.⁹⁷

Aside from the letter to Kennan quoted above, Berlin did not explicitly address the Holocaust, perhaps out of a sense of guilt at having been blind to its reality at the time. Or perhaps he felt that he simply had nothing to say, that there was nothing that he

⁹⁵ "A Letter to George Kennan," *Liberty* p. 342

⁹⁶ "Conversations for Tomorrow"

⁹⁷ "Generalissimo Stalin and the Art of Government," (under the pseudonym "O. Utis") *Foreign Affairs* 30 (1952) pp. 197–214; "The Silence in Russian Culture," *Foreign Affairs* 36 (1957), pp. 1–24; and "The Soviet Intelligentsia," (under the pseudonym "L"), *ibid.*, pp. 122–30. Berlin wrote several further pieces dealing with the contemporary scene in the late 1940s and early to mid 1950s, which I have not discussed here: "The Anglo-American Predicament," *Listener* 42 (1949), pp. 518–19 and 538; "Notes on the Way," in *Time and Tide* 30 (1949), pp. 1133–4, 1157–8, 1187–8 (which is in many respects a dry-run for "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century"), as well as contributions to the *Britannica Book[s] of the Year* in 1950, 1951, and 1952.

could say, that could shed light on such a pitch-black monstrosity. Whereof he could not speak, he remained largely silent.⁹⁸ But he did not remain silent about the Soviet Union.

The primary fact of Soviet life, in Berlin's account, was the terror bred by total, all-embracing, unpredictable state violence against any and all members of the population. But Berlin's nightmare vision led him to look past the immediate horror of Soviet life, to the equally horrible vision that drove the Bolshevik leadership. The vision of Lenin and Stalin was essentially technocratic: the watchwords were efficiency, tidiness, security. Freedom consisted in doing what was rational, that is, what conduced to the common good: society was a giant machine, and people were semi-automated workers in that machine.⁹⁹ In pursuit of this vision, Stalin sought to make his subjects incapable of thinking their own thoughts, to make inner emigration impossible by demolishing their inner worlds. By keeping people under constant pressure, constantly unsure, constantly on the run, trying to adhere to an ever-changing orthodoxy, he "set himself to repress ideas as such."¹⁰⁰ Soviet society was marked by the iron hand of systematic exploitation to a far greater degree than capitalism ever was. Official professions of ideology didn't correspond to practice, but were used as smoke screens, rationalizations, for ruthless deeds.¹⁰¹ The Communists had modernized Russian society; but in doing so, Russia and its people (and its neighbors) had been "vivisected ... to fit a theory."¹⁰²

In "Democracy, Communism and the Individual" Berlin was concerned to state the basic moral differences that separated Communism and liberal individualism; but he also warned that the evils that characterized Communism were dangers threatening the Western, liberal-democratic world. Democracy, Berlin asserted, "presupposes that every

⁹⁸ See *Conversations* pp. 18–21; and Ignatieff, p. 123

⁹⁹ "The Silence in Russian Culture," pp. 6–7

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 16–18.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, pp. 19–20

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p. 22; cf. "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century," discussed below.

man is in principle capable of giving answers to personal and social questions which are as worthy of respect as any other man's, that communication is possible between all men ... because ... persuasion can be used to induce them to modify their present aims and recognize the value of those of others."¹⁰³ This communication and conscious self-direction and self-understanding are impossible if Marx's doctrines of class struggle and economic determinism are true: for then men would inhabit different, class-defined worlds, communication between which would be impossible.

Related to Communism's determinism is its teleological view of history as a process with a definite, discoverable direction, which is the sole standard of what is real and rational. The implication of this is that the winners are always right, and the losers always wrong; there is no reason to try to understand one's opponents, or to give a fair hearing to anyone other than the victorious side. Democracy, on the other hand, depends on a belief in the validity of different sides, and the dignity and importance of all people; it is "irreconcilable with the belief in the privileged status of the elect appointed by history to guide and govern the rest."¹⁰⁴

Berlin goes on to refer to the contrast between the Utopian vision of a classless State where "conflict is automatically eliminated, men are 'adjusted' to one another and government is unnecessary" and the liberal democratic desire for 'a necessarily precarious balance between incompatible ideals based on the recognition of the equal or nearly equal validity of human aspirations as such, none of which must be subordinated to any single uncriticisable principle.'" The principles of liberal democracy are also incompatible with programs of social engineering directed by a bureaucratic elite. Such a policy is based on the notion that "the proper way to live is discovered by experts wise enough to

¹⁰³ 'Democracy, Communism and the Individual,' pp. 1-2. I am very grateful to Dr. Hardy for letting me see the typescript of this essay.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.* p. 2

detect the direction of history, to which the wise will adjust their lives," and is objectionable because it holds that those who dissent from this direction are behaving blindly and madly, and are thus "not worth listening to ... a nuisance ... to be swept away as an obstacle to progress". At best, such people are viewed as deluded, and treated as a psychiatrist would treat his patients; at worst, they are marked for forced readjustment, or elimination. According to this new, scientific absolutism, there is one right path, and "the individual soul" must be engineered to follow it, independently and often despite "its own conscious desires, ideals, aspirations." Such a view "denies utterly the value of individual experience over the impersonal needs of society, which ... are independent of what individuals think good or true or beautiful."¹⁰⁵

All of this reads as a cold-war polemic, as indeed it is. But it is more than that. For Berlin turns this critique on Western society as well, lamenting that, in its "pursuit of social health" it has forgotten those ends "which alone make such health or adjustment worth having." Those who, like the Soviets, take a low view of human nature see society as a "correctional institution;" for many in the West who take a more benevolent view, society is "an enormous hospital and all men are inmates, each suffering ... from some kind of malaise or maladjustment, which it is the duty of education to cure or at least to make bearable." This vision, however benign it may seem, is still paternalistic and ultimately stunting and oppressive. Berlin is not against social service, but he sees such service as "a necessary aid to the making free of individuals to pursue whatever their minds and hearts are set on," whereas the attitude that he sees prevailing threatens "benevolent enslavement and the gradual atrophy of disinterested creative impulses".¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p. 4

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.* p. 5.

These same themes were taken up a year later in "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century," where Berlin insists on, and seeks to explain, the intellectual differences between the 19th and 20th centuries. The great innovation of the twentieth century was not to question whether all genuine questions had single and definite solutions (which Sextus, Hume, and others had already done, and as Berlin would do). It was the belief that the questions themselves were not real, and could be made, forcibly, to go away; the desire to obliterate the questions themselves, not through rational argument, but through treating the questioner as a patient who must be cured, whose outlook must be altered. It sought to secure agreement by "removing the psychological possibility of alternatives."¹⁰⁷

This new attitude "looks at all inner conflict as an evil, or at best as a form of futile self-frustration," and considers

"the kind of friction, the moral or emotional or intellectual collisions, the particular kind of acute mental discomfort which rises to a condition of agony ... as being no better than purely destructive diseases ... dangerous deviations from that line to which individuals and societies must adhere if they are to march towards a state of well-ordered, painless, contented, self-perpetuating equilibrium."¹⁰⁸

This leads to the "reduction of all questions and aspirations to dislocations which the expert can set right," which rests on the "denial of the rational and productive nature of all, or even the majority, of men," and is thus "hostile to the development of men as creative and self-directing beings."¹⁰⁹

The new attitude, which seeks to diminish strife and misery by the atrophy of the faculties capable of causing them, is naturally hostile, or at least deeply suspicious, towards disinterested curiosity, to all pursuits that don't conduce to building and maintaining an integrated social whole. Having undetermined choices leads to doubt and

¹⁰⁷ "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century," *Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 23–4; cf. "Philosophy and Government Repression," SR p. 69

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p. 25

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 34–5

despair; alternatives must be eliminated through the “dogmatic organization of the life of the spirit.”¹¹⁰

The goal of the new ideology is therefore to achieve a state of affairs “in which human behaviour can be manipulated with relative ease by technically qualified specialists – adjusters of conflicts and promoters of peace both of body and of mind, engineers and other scientific experts in the service of the ruling group.” The trend of such an order is “to reduce all issues to technical problems”, which in turn “depends upon the suppression of whatever in the individual might raise doubt or assert itself against the single all-embracing, all-clarifying, all-satisfying plan.”¹¹¹

In this vision, the values of society are defined not by the desires or the moral sense of individuals or groups within it, but by “some factual hypothesis or metaphysical dogma ... in terms of which the answers to the question of what is good, right, required, desirable, fitting, can be scientifically deduced, or intuited ... [t]here is one and only one direction in which a given aggregate of individuals is conceived to be traveling”, driven by impersonal forces which can be controlled only through the disciplining of masses of people. This leads to the vision of a new, even more rigid and complete scientific or ideological theocracy, based on dogmatic faith and obedience, to new forms of reification and dehumanization.¹¹²

While this approach seeks to remove conflict, sap idealism, repress unpleasant and disruptive feeling, while it aims at the rationalized, scientific administration of society, it is not necessarily itself dispassionate or cynical. Rather, “there is all too little disbelief;” the new ideologies are adhered to with “unreasoning faith and that blind intolerance towards scepticism which springs ... from an inner bankruptcy or terror, the

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 28, 33

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 28–9

¹¹² *ibid.*, p. 34

hope against hope that here at least is a safe haven:" the technocratic and totalitarian dreams are attempts to surrender, to lay down the burden of liberty at the feet of authority, to narrow the horizons of human activity to manageable proportions.¹¹³

Therefore, in 1950 the world was "stiff with rigid rules and codes and ardent, irrational religions." There was less room for the individual to commit blunders; benign paternalism has made the individual's area of choice smaller, not in the name of competing values, but in the name of doing away with conflict altogether.¹¹⁴

In such conditions, Berlin was concerned with safeguarding "free self-expression, the infinite variety of persons and of the relationships between them, and the right of free choice, difficult to endure but more intolerable to surrender;" he feared that those living under paternalistic technocracies would forget what it can ever have been like to value these things, which are a vital part of what make men human. However, he recognized that some amount of organization is necessary for the defense of the freedom with which it conflicts; neither can be sacrificed; so the answer lay in "some logically untidy, flexible, and even ambiguous compromise. Every situation calls for its own specific policy." Berlin's judgment on his time, his plea for humanistic values, deserves quoting in full:

"What the age calls for is not (as we are so often told) more faith, or stronger leadership, or more scientific organization. Rather it is the opposite – less Messianic ardour, more enlightened scepticism, more toleration of idiosyncrasies ... more room for the attainment of their personal ends by individuals and by minorities whose tastes and beliefs find ... little response among the majority. What is required is less mechanical, less fanatical application of general principles, however rational or righteous, a more cautious and less arrogantly self-confident application of accepted, scientifically tested, general solutions to unexamined individual cases ... since no solution can be guaranteed against error, no disposition is final. And therefore a loose texture and toleration of a minimum of inefficiency, even a degree of indulgence in idle talk, idle curiosity, aimless pursuit of this or that without authorization ... may allow more spontaneous, individual variation (for which the individual must in the end assume full responsibility) and will

¹¹³ *ibid.*, p. 30

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 37–8

always be worth more than the neatest and most delicately fashioned imposed pattern."¹¹⁵

These writings from the late 1940s and early-to-mid 1950s reveal Berlin's thought as developing very much out of the intellectual and political circumstances of his time; they confirm the view of Berlin as an intellectual Cold Warrior, but they also show his vision to have been more complex and challenging to the orthodoxies of his own society. They also reveal that Berlin's mature doctrines about pluralism and liberalism grew out of a deeper, emotional attachment to the freedom and dignity of individual persons, and opposition to cruelty, coercion, the cramping of human personality and confining of human possibility. These emotional commitments were themselves tied to a conception of what a good, worthwhile life consists of, one which goes beyond the mere existence of a plurality of possibilities (though this is certainly a vital precondition of such a life) to embrace a vision of individuals, each accorded equal weight and respect, striving to understand one another and themselves, following their own lights, pursuing those ends which they find valuable, and exercising their capacity for choice as free, self-aware adults, rather than being patronized as children or manipulated as material. This was Berlin's vision of humanism; and it, no less than his pluralism and liberalism, his opposition to tyranny and simplification, pervades and animates all that he wrote. It is to the content of this positive vision, which grew out of the darkly negative concerns thus far discussed, that we now turn.

II. FOR THE CROOKED TIMBER OF HUMANITY: THE CONTOURS AND CONTENTS OF BERLIN'S HUMANISM

*"... men do not live by fighting evils. They live by positive goals ..."*¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 39–40

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 40

A. Human Nature: Complexity, Commonality, and the Value of Variety

"... humans are too complex to demand simple solutions"¹¹⁷
"the complex, crooked texture of men and institutions."¹¹⁸

Berlin held that all political and moral positions are prefaced on, and can only be understood in terms of, conceptions of what human beings are.¹¹⁹ Therefore, the first question to ask of a political or moral philosopher is, what vision or understanding of human nature, or possibilities, or needs, is at the heart of, or assumed by, his or her philosophy? This question is especially important to the humanist thinker: since human beings are at the center of concern, since it is by them that we orient ourselves, their nature is an inescapable issue.

Some political thinkers have sought to remove questions of human nature from discussions of politics. Not so Berlin. His version of liberalism is distinctive first and foremost for being pluralistic – for being closely connected to (if not logically entailed by) his doctrine of value pluralism.¹²⁰ But Berlin's liberalism is also distinctively and importantly humanistic, in several respects, which shall be examined over the course of this section. The first way in which Berlin's liberalism is "humanistic" is that it derives a

¹¹⁷ "Alexander Herzen," RT p. 201

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 199

¹¹⁹ See, e.g., "Does Political Theory Still Exist?," PSM pp. 59–91 *passim*.

¹²⁰ The question of the relationship between Berlin's pluralism and liberalism has been the source of much debate. For Berlin's own views on this question, see *Conversations*, pp. 44, 142; and Isaiah Berlin and Bernard Williams, "Pluralism and Liberalism: A Reply," *Political Studies* 42 (1994), pp.306–9; for the contention that pluralism and liberalism are in conflict, see Gray, *op.cit.*; for the argument that, at least in Berlin's case, the two are linked, see Lukes, *op.cit.*, and Riley, *op.cit.* For explorations of the relationship between pluralism and liberalism generally, see Albert W. Dzur, "Value Pluralism versus Political Liberalism?" *Social Theory and Practice* 24 No 3 (Sept. 1998), 375–92; and William A. Galston, "Value Pluralism and Liberal Political Theory," *American Political Science Review* 93 No 4 (December 1999), 769–78.

liberal belief in certain human rights from a conception of human nature. There are certain "natural rights," such as freedom of thought, which flow from the basic way in which "human beings are mentally constituted;" to deny these rights is to violate "basic interest[s] and need[s] and craving[s] of human beings," to commit a sin against human nature.¹²¹ Perhaps human nature is malleable, and subject to change over time; perhaps there are at least some permanent and common features which cannot be changed without violating what is naturally human, just as the human face, however much variety and variation its features admit and manifest, must always have a common shape and features, or we consider it deformed.¹²²

Berlin was never very definite about how permanent, fixed, universal or specific this human nature was; but he did insist that it was characterized both by complexity, and by commonality. Pluralism, poised precariously between relativism and monism, was Berlin's attempt to do justice to this conception of human nature as a complex tissue of variety and changeability, commonality and constancy. Berlin's humanism was both pluralist, and universalist; it insisted on the reality, and the essential moral and psychological, political and social, significance of both what made human beings different, and what we share.

What we share is, in Berlin's words, a "brute fact," simply there, which cannot be ignored or changed. Human beings demand reasons and make choices: we think and we act, and we are aware of our thinking and acting. Were this not so – and if for some reason it ever ceases to be so – our ways of perceiving and describing ourselves would be completely different, or would have to become so.¹²³

¹²¹ See "Philosophy and Government Repression," SR, p.73–4.

¹²² The facial analogy is adapted from Montaigne; see Michel de Montaigne, "Of Experience," in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965, p. 819

¹²³ "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" PSM pp.82–3.

Berlin's pluralism therefore holds that values are objective, because their nature and the pursuit of them are simply part of what it is to be a human being, which is "an objective given." That men and women are men and women, and not other things, is an objective fact; and part of this fact is that there are certain values that men and women can and do pursue; the multiplicity of values recognized by pluralism is "part of the essence of humanity rather than arbitrary creations of men's subjective fancies."¹²⁴

Other human beings, however different from us, are still fellow human beings, and thus like us. They are "nos semblables;" we can, with sufficient effort, come to understand them by entering into their ways of thinking, which are based on human characteristics common to us all.¹²⁵ "[T]here are many ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathising and deriving light from each other ... what makes men human is common to them, and acts as a bridge between them" We can appreciate why others pursue other values, and imagine ourselves also pursuing them. Their values are recognizably human to us, and we can therefore both understand, and judge, them: "We are free to criticise the values of other cultures, to condemn them, but we cannot pretend to not understand them at all."¹²⁶ Human ends may not be compatible or commensurable, but they must be comprehensible and communicable; they cannot be unlimited, and they must be capable of being understood by other human beings; otherwise they cease to be human at all, and we speak of them as deranged.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ "My Intellectual Path," p. 12; cf "The Pursuit of Ideal," CTH p.11

¹²⁵ *Conversations*, p. 37; "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth Century European Thought," CTH p.79

¹²⁶ "The Pursuit of the Ideal," CTH p. 11

¹²⁷ "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth Century European Thought," CTH 80; cf. "Introduction," *Five Essays on Liberty in Liberty*, pp. 24–5, 54.

Yet such understanding of others is not easy, and yields no simple answers about human nature, because human nature and human life are too inherently complex to admit of facile understanding or easy answers. Human beings are open-ended, diverse creatures, who pursue a variety of mutually contradictory and often confused, but very real, goals, and are always open to change. Berlin shared the view he attributed to Mill of man as

“creative, incapable of self-completion, and therefore never wholly predictable; fallible, a complex combination of opposites, some reconcilable, others incapable of being resolved or harmonised; unable to cease from his search for truth, happiness, novelty, freedom, but with no guarantee, theological or logical or scientific, of being able to attain them; a free, imperfect being, capable of determining his own destiny in circumstances favourable to the development of his reason and his gifts.”¹²⁸

Complexity, diversity, changeability, incompleteness, which made it impossible to arrive at a single, fixed definition of human nature and human needs, were themselves essential parts of human nature; a paradoxical blend of indeterminacy and inviolability was characteristic of the nature of human nature.

While Berlin was careful to insist on the reality, and the importance of retaining an awareness of, what is common to all human beings, he was more concerned throughout much of his work with insisting on the value of variety. He wrote that

“the differences of cultures and characters are as deep as the similarities ... we are none the poorer for this rich variety: *knowledge* of it opens the windows of the mind (and soul) and makes people wiser, nicer, & more civilized; absence of it breeds irrational hatreds, prejudices, hatreds, ghastly extermination of heretics and those who are different.”¹²⁹

Like Mill, Berlin desired “variety and individuality for their own sakes ... diversity, versatility, fullness of life – the unaccountable leap of individual genius, the spontaneity and uniqueness of a man, a group, a civilization”; and detested “standardisation ... timidity, mildness, natural conformity, lack of interest in human issues,” the prospect of “the human pack in full cry against the victim” (did Berlin recall the Russian crowd

¹²⁸ “John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life,” in *Liberty*, p. 250

dragging away the policeman on writing this?), "narrowness, uniformity, the crippling effect of persecution, the crushing of individuals by the weight of authority or of custom or of public opinion." He believed that order, tidiness, and even peace, should not be worshipped blindly, nor "bought at the price of obliterating the variety and colour of untamed human beings with unextinguished passions and untrammelled imaginations." Berlin's goal was "the widest variety of human life and character" possible; he was therefore anxious, no less than the author of *On Liberty*, to "preserve variety, to keep doors open to change, to resist the dangers of social pressure ... [to] protect dissidents and heretics as such."¹³⁰

This belief in the value of variety was, again, based on Berlin's conception of human nature. He believed that "human beings are complex and fragile and ... there is a value in the very irregularity of their structure which is violated by attempts to force it into patterns or straitjackets,"¹³¹ because "human creativity may depend upon the variety of mutually exclusive choices."¹³² Individual temperaments naturally differ, and must if human beings are to lead rewarding and interesting and satisfying lives; "too much enthusiasm for common norms can lead to intolerance and disregard for the inner life of man."¹³³

It is therefore important, and admirable, to be able to appreciate, to recognize not only the inevitability, but also the inherent value, of variety, and of the disagreement and conflict that are its consequences. Thus, Berlin praised Montesquieu for the wide range of his sympathies, for his feeling for "the vast variety of situations, and the extreme complexity and intricacy of individual cases," which made the quest for uniformity both

¹²⁹ "Notes on Prejudice," *Liberty* p. 346

¹³⁰ "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," in *Liberty* pp. 221, 228–9, 238–9

¹³¹ "Alexander Herzen," RT p. 205

¹³² "The Pursuit of the Ideal," CTH p. 17

¹³³ "Introduction," to *Five Essays on Liberty*, in *Liberty*, pp. 49–50

blinding and dangerous; "Only those societies are truly free which are in a state of 'agitation', unstable equilibrium; whose members are free to pursue – choose between – a variety of ends or goals."¹³⁴

Berlin shared this taste for variety as the zest of life and the essence of human personality: he loved human beings precisely because we are maddeningly irreducible, diverse and difficult to fit into a single mode.¹³⁵ He valued what contributed to "a broad, full, generous tide of life in which the full resources of individuals could be developed to their richest and most diversified extent,"¹³⁶ and celebrated those who were different, even difficult, who went "against the current," and therefore expanded and enriched the range of human possibility.

For Berlin, the value of political goals such as liberty, and indeed of all of those things which are not natural, but are created or attained by human beings with effort and within society, "*consists in the fact that without it the individual personality cannot realize all its potentialities* – cannot live, act, enjoy, create in the illimitable fashions which every moment of history affords, and which differ in unfathomable ways from every other moment of history, and are wholly incommensurable with them."¹³⁷ Berlin's politics and ethics therefore begin, and end, with considerations of human nature and human personality. The basic responsibilities of political institutions is to protect certain human rights as derived from the essential givens of human nature; but the larger goal of politics, and of human activity generally, is the open-ended, varied, and free development of a multitude of individual human characters in a multiplicity of different directions.

B. Returning the Ticket: the Rejection of Final Solutions

¹³⁴ "Montesquieu," AC p. 158

¹³⁵ See Avishai Margalit, "Isaiah Berlin at Eighty," in Margalit 1989 op cit., p. 8

¹³⁶ "Chaim Weizmann," PI p 54

¹³⁷ "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty," RT pp. 94–5; emphasis added

*"The notion that there is a splendid future in store for humanity, that it is guaranteed by history, and that it justifies the most appalling cruelties in the present ... [is] a fatal doctrine directed against human life."*¹³⁸

Because human beings are complex and unpredictable, and because their values clash so that the very idea of perfection was incoherent as well as impossible, Berlin rejected the idea of "final solutions" to human problems. This position, central to Berlin's pluralism, is well-known (and well-expressed by Berlin himself)¹³⁹; I will therefore not elaborate on it further here. I will instead focus on other aspects of Berlin's moral thought that led him to reject the idea of "final solutions," and which would have led him to reject them even if he thought them possible and practicable. The first concerns Berlin's belief in the undesirability of finality *qua* finality, as a threat to freedom and variety; the second involves his beliefs about the very nature of values, and especially the relationship between means and ends.

*The idea of a final solution – if one can leave aside the connotations with which the phrase has been permanently imbued by Hitler and his minions – is on the face of it tempting. A permanent end to human strife and suffering, the eternal reign of justice, harmony, peace, truth, and light, has been at the heart of the great eschatological and utopian and indeed progressive movements, both religious and secularized, throughout much of history. It is a vision that anyone concerned with the horrors that pervade human existence as it is now, and has ever been – that is, any decent human being – will find appealing, and perhaps even necessary. But it is a dangerous vision nonetheless. It may be a useful goal to hold up when striving to make the world better; but, as Berlin observed, "in resisting great present evils, it is as well not to be blinded to the possible danger of the total triumph of any one principle."*¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ "Alexander Herzen," RT p. 194

¹³⁹ See, e.g., "The Pursuit of the Ideal," CTH, passim.

¹⁴⁰ "Introduction," to *Five Essays on Liberty*, in *Liberty*, p. 50; he added: "It seems to me that no sober observer of the twentieth century can avoid qualms in this matter."

Because Berlin's nightmare vision was of a world in which variety and liberty had no place, a world lacking in the play of diverse and open-ended human personalities, the ideal of perfection, desired by so many, was unappealing to him. For "once perfection has been reached the need for choice between alternatives withers away ... [in the perfect society] the recrudescence of basic disagreement is a symptom of error and vice." Berlin regarded this ideal of living in "a frictionless medium" without conflict and therefore without alternatives between incompatible ends as a "coherent fantasy" which threatened to turn human beings into "brainwashed, contented beings."¹⁴¹ If a singular, harmonious pattern of perfection could be achieved, there would be no place for dissent or deviation from it, and therefore no room for freedom; variety would become a blight, liberty a sin.¹⁴²

If a final or perfect solution is in itself a gloomy prospect for Berlin, the idea of such a solution is an even graver danger: if Berlin was correct, the former is ultimately impossible, whereas the latter is a very real motivation for inhumanity. The logic of pursuing Utopia is one of ideological pogroms, of ruthless crusades:

"For if one really believes that such a solution is possible, then surely no cost is too high a price to pay for that? ... Since I know the only true path to the ultimate solution of the problems of society, I know which way to drive the human caravan; and since you are ignorant of what I know, you cannot be allowed to have liberty of choice even within the narrowest limits, if the goal is to be reached ... if there is resistance based on ignorance or malevolence, then it must be broken and hundreds of thousands may have to perish to make millions happy for all time. What choice have we, who have the knowledge, but to be willing to sacrifice them all?"¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ "Introduction," to *Five Essays on Liberty*, in *Liberty*, p. 44

¹⁴² See "Philosophy and Government Repression," SR p. 75

¹⁴³ "On the Pursuit of the Ideal," CTH p. 15; cf. "Introduction," *Five Essays on Liberty* in *Liberty* pp. 47–8

In such a logic, all means, however horrific, are justified by the goal of perfection. Berlin therefore rejected that goal as itself dangerous; but he also rejected the entire mentality of justifying wicked means in the name of even noble and attractive ends.

There are several facets to Berlin's thinking about means and ends, all of which are of central importance to his moral thought, all of them parts of his humanism. As we have seen, Berlin, following Kant, held that human beings are ends in themselves, and therefore to treat them or conceive of them as means is a sin against human nature. Following from this principle – which was partly a philosophical position, partly a secular article of faith – were Berlin's contentions that means are not necessarily justified by the ends at which they aim; and that values should be pursued as ends in themselves, not as means. These three interlocking lines of thought together constitute a rejection of all forms of instrumentalism.

Although he traced his own pluralism to Machiavelli, Berlin's moral vision was a sustained repudiation of Machiavelli's famous dictum that the ends justify the means. Berlin recognized that compromise is necessary in the world of imperfect, flawed and corrupt men and women, and that loss, sacrifice and the violation of legitimate and binding principles are necessary in a world of conflicting, incompatible values; but such compromises, sacrifices, and violations are what they are, and should not be welcomed, excused, explained away or celebrated as anything else. And certain prices, certain sacrifices, are beyond permissibility. Good ends occasionally necessitate bad means, but they never make them anything but bad; and they never justify evil. On the contrary, "evil means destroy good ends."¹⁴⁴ Berlin's tolerance stopped short at brutal cynicism and ruthlessness, which he could not bear.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ "Fathers and Children," RT p. 299

¹⁴⁵ See Annan, "The Don as Magus," in *The Dons*, op.cit.

Ends do not justify means; they also are not themselves means to yet other, greater ends. Values are not valuable because they conduce to some single, ultimate goal, but because they are valuable by definition, by their own inherent nature. As a result, to sacrifice or violate some human value in the pursuit of another is not justified, since the value sacrificed, no less than the value to which it is sacrificed, is inherently valuable; it does not derive its value from, and therefore is not dependent on, or expendable in the name of, some other goal.¹⁴⁶

Berlin declared that "Everything in nature, in history, is what it is, and its own end. The present is its own fulfillment, it does not exist for the sake of some unknown future." If the opposite were true, we would be mere puppets, and the purpose and meaning of life would be defined by what it led to, by its end, its terminus – that is, death.¹⁴⁷ But this is ridiculous, as well as dangerous.¹⁴⁸ The

"purpose of life is to live it ... is life itself, the purpose of the struggle for liberty is the liberty here, today, of living individuals, each with his own individual ends, for the sake of which they move and fight and suffer, ends which are sacred to them; to crush their freedom, to stop their pursuits, to ruin their ends for the sake of some ineffable felicity of the future, is blind, because that future is always too uncertain, and vicious, because it outrages the only moral values we know, tramples on real human lives and needs".¹⁴⁹

The preceding quote comes from one of Berlin's essays on Alexander Herzen, from whom he derived the vehement contention, at the core of his entire outlook on

¹⁴⁶ See "Alexander Herzen," RT 197; "Philosophy and Government Repression," SR p. 54

¹⁴⁷ In this respect Berlin echoed John Maynard Keynes when the latter said that "it is misleading to talk about things in terms of this 'long run.' In the long run we are all dead." (I am indebted to my friend Mr. Chiansan Ma for this quote.)

¹⁴⁸ In the months preceding and encompassing the composition of this essay, the world has had ample opportunity to witness the horrors and catastrophes that result from visions that deify death as the purpose of life and its ultimate, redemptive value and goal; as well as moralities that hold any means, however monstrous, as justifiable by appeals to "higher" ends, be they celestial or earthly.

¹⁴⁹ "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty," RT pp. 93–4; see also *ibid.*, p. 95

human life, that individual human lives, and life in general, are ends in themselves. It was this insight that Berlin found most valuable in Herzen, and which led him to regard the Russian revolutionary romantic as the most original and profound moralist of the 19th century. Herzen believed that

“the ultimate goal of life was life itself; that the day and the hour were ends in themselves, not a means to another day or another experience ... that remote ends were a dream, that faith in them was a fatal illusion; that to sacrifice the present or the immediate and foreseeable future to these future ends must always lead to cruel and futile forms of human sacrifice ... that values were not found in an impersonal, objective realm, but were created by human beings, changed with the generations of men, but were nonetheless binding upon those who lived in their light; that suffering was inescapable, and infallible knowledge neither attainable nor needed. He believed in reason, scientific methods, individual action, empirically discovered truths; but he tended to suspect that faith in general formulas, laws, prescription in human affairs was an attempt, sometimes catastrophic, always irrational, to escape from the uncertainty and unpredictable variety of life to the false security of our own symmetrical fantasies.”¹⁵⁰

Berlin accepted as his own not only Herzen’s moral vision, but also Herzen’s philosophy – or anti-philosophy – of history. Herzen had rebelled violently against the “great despotic vision” of historical inevitability, the rule of history by impersonal forces, the existence of one ultimate, harmonious truth, which governed history and towards which history was headed. He held that, on the contrary,

“nature obeys no plan, that history follows no libretto; that no single key, no formula can, in principle, solve the problems of individuals and societies; that general solutions are not solutions, universal ends are never real ends, that every age has its own texture and its own questions, that shortcuts and generalizations are no substitute for experience.”¹⁵¹

Berlin, too, rejected the teleological vision of history as pursuing a set end or plan.¹⁵²

Because he believed that there was no higher purpose or direction towards which history moves – that the lives of and relationships between individuals are all that there is, or ever will be – Berlin rejected the idea of sacrificing human values and human lives to “higher” ends or future goals; he rejected the idea of “final solutions” as a matter of

¹⁵⁰ “Herzen and his Memoirs,” AC p. 211

¹⁵¹ “Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty,” RT pp. 87–8

¹⁵² See, e.g., “Historical Inevitability,” PSM pp. 131–2

principle. He admired Herzen for rejecting social orders that, in the pursuit of admirable goals, trampled on life and liberty and inflicted humiliation and oppression "with the same moral fury as that with which Ivan Karamazov spurned the promise of eternal happiness bought at the cost of the torture of one innocent child."¹⁵³ Ivan spoke for Berlin, and for humanists everywhere, in his insistence that

*"the one thing which no utilitarian paradise, no promise of eternal harmony in the future within some vast organic whole will make us accept is the use of human beings as mere means – the doctoring of them until they are made to do what they do, not for the sake of the purposes which are their purposes, fulfillment of hopes which however foolish or desperate are at least their own, but for reasons which only we, the manipulators, who freely twist them for our own purposes, can understand."*¹⁵⁴

What Berlin cared about was "not the historical process or the condition of the universe or the solemn march of the Hegelian God through the world, but the lives and liberties and aspirations of individual men and women whose sufferings no sublime universal harmony could explain away or redeem."¹⁵⁵ He therefore regarded Ivan's refusal as an act of moral grandeur, a declaration of humanistic piety¹⁵⁶; and all his life, throughout all his work, he joined Ivan in returning the ticket.

C. The Sense of Reality; the Importance of Individuality

*"one of the deepest modern disasters is to be caught up in abstractions instead of realities"*¹⁵⁷

Berlin's moral beliefs were of a piece with his intellectual method: they both reflected, and cemented, his commitment to a particular way of looking at and thinking about the world. Just as Berlin urged a moral position that emphasized the importance and inviolability of human

¹⁵³ "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty," RT pp. 87–8

¹⁵⁴ "A Letter to George Kennan," *Liberty* pp. 338–9

¹⁵⁵ "Vissarion Belinsky," RT p. 169

¹⁵⁶ Whether this is how Dostoevsky intended Ivan's actions and words to be interpreted is debatable; but then Berlin was never very fond of Dostoevsky. See *Conversations*, pp. 172–3. The phrase "humanistic piety" comes from Ignatieff, p. 54; Ignatieff gives it in quotes, unreferenced, so it presumably comes from Berlin's spoken recollections.

¹⁵⁷ "Alexander Herzen," RT p. 197

beings as ends rather than means, in order to combat the tendency to sacrifice human beings to abstractions, so too he championed what he called the "sense of reality" as a correction to dogmatic, simplistic and Procrustean approaches to the world. Berlin feared constricting and distorting formulae," which "cut into the living flesh of social or individual sentiment ... vivisectioning it with the surgical knife of some dogmatic theory or ideology," which failed to convey the unique tones and colors of life. He therefore emphasized what Meinecke called "individualizing observation:" "a sense of the concrete, many-faceted, changing, never completed life of societies."¹⁵⁸

Berlin himself, true to this emphasis on the particular, often depicted the qualities of the "sense of reality" by describing the senses of reality of individual persons. Thus, through his championing of Herzen's portrayal of his own world, Berlin emphasized that an insightful and true sense of reality is "untrammelled," not committed to a single purpose or thesis or doctrine that determined what he perceived. Herzen also exemplified the "sense of reality" in that he recognized "the crucial distinction between words that are about words, and words that are about persons or things in the real world."¹⁵⁹ Herzen's "clear-sighted empiricism" led him to realize that "words and ideas offer no substitute for experience, that life teems with exceptions and upsets the best-made rules and systems." Herzen, like few men of his time, saw that all problems are specific;

"general problems, such as 'What is *the* end (or *the* meaning) of life?' ... are not answerable in principle ... because the questions themselves are misconceived, because ends, patterns, meanings, causes differ with the situation and outlook and needs of the questioner, and can be correctly and clearly formulated only if these are made part of the question".

Herzen's discussion of human beings is therefore not abstract and generalized, but full of "vivid, three-dimensional, 'rounded' perception of actual character, authentic human

¹⁵⁸ "Meinecke and Historicism," POI pp. 209–10

¹⁵⁹ "Alexander Herzen," RT pp. 208–9

beings with real needs, seeking attainable human ends, set in circumstances which can be visualised."¹⁶⁰

An even better model of the "sense of reality" than the penetrating but often quixotic Herzen was Turgenev, whose sober and scrupulous attention to "the overlapping sides of every question," "fascination with the varieties of character and situation as such, ... inveterate habit of doing justice to the full complexity and diversity of goals, attitudes, beliefs ... [and] capacity for rendering the very multiplicity of interpenetrating human perspectives that shade imperceptibly into each other, nuances of character and behaviour, motives and attitudes" made him the most admirably clear-eyed and truthful of writers. For Turgenev, abstractions were "substitutes for reality ... doctrines which life, with its uneven surface and irregular shapes of real human character and activity, would surely resist and shatter." His vision therefore was always "delicate, sharp, concrete, and incurably realistic."¹⁶¹

The "sense of reality" that these Russian writers shared was a sense of the "infinitesimals" of life, the subtlest, most evanescent and pervasive data of existence.¹⁶² The emphasis on the particular was key. Berlin believed that "the concrete situation is almost everything,"¹⁶³ that "what is real is always particular; what matters is the unique, the individual, the concrete, that wherein a thing differs from other things." Each particular predicament requires its own specific treatment; it is vital to be sensitive to "the day-to-day play of circumstances ... the individual nature of each case."¹⁶⁴ Only

¹⁶⁰ "A Revolutionary Without Fanaticism," POI pp. 100–1

¹⁶¹ "Fathers and Children," RT pp. 269, 271, 292–3

¹⁶² See "The Hedgehog and the Fox," RT pp. 48–9

¹⁶³ "The Pursuit of the Ideal," CTH p. 18

¹⁶⁴ "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," *Liberty*, p. 238

specific questions can be answered in a truly meaningful way; and those answers depend on "the specific ends of specific human beings in specific situations."¹⁶⁵

Berlin was a philosopher, and therefore depended on the use of general terms, and tended to treat subjects, in at least some of his works, on a certain level of abstraction.¹⁶⁶ However, he was sharply aware that general terms such as human nature, freedom, peace, war, power, etc. are "convenient symbols which sum up, are a concentrate of, my observations." However much we strive for truth, a great deal is left out: general terms cannot capture the "endlessly shifting, altering views, feelings, reactions, instincts, beliefs which constitute the uniqueness of each individual and of each of his acts and thoughts ... the individual flavour, the peculiar pattern of life."¹⁶⁷

The possession of a good sense of reality depended not only on sensitivity to particular human realities, but also the virtues of intellectual modesty and level-headedness, a capacity for discrimination, a sense of perspective and proportion, as well as fidelity to the facts of experience. Berlin always remained an empiricist, believing that "all there is in the world is persons and things and ideas in people's heads – goals, emotions, hopes, fears, choices, imaginative visions and all other forms of human experience,"¹⁶⁸ and that "intuitive certainty is no substitute for carefully tested empirical knowledge based on observation and experiment and free discussion between men."¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty," RT p. 112

¹⁶⁶ I am grateful to my friend Ms. Kate Tsyvkin for her astute (and inadequately answered) questioning on this point.

¹⁶⁷ "The Sense of Reality," SR p. 19

¹⁶⁸ *Conversations* p. 32 See also "My Intellectual Path," POI, p. 11; and "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberty*, p. 217, n. 1, where Berlin endorses Bentham's statement that "Individual interests are the only real interests ... Can it be conceivable that there are men so absurd as to ... prefer the man who is not, to him who is; who torment the living, under the pretense of promoting the happiness of those who are not born, and who may never be born?"

¹⁶⁹ "Notes on Prejudice," *Liberty* p. 346

Berlin therefore admired those who were temperamentally empiricists, who "observed curiously, minutely and insatiably," who were fascinated by the concrete details that they saw and the particular facts which they learnt for their own sakes, and not the sake of some larger lesson.¹⁷⁰

Connected to Berlin's empiricism, and like it a feature of his British intellectual inheritance, was his nominalism: the belief that every thing is what it is, and not anything else¹⁷¹; and that not all things must have something to do with everything else.¹⁷²

Nominalism can, of course, be carried too far, until it too becomes a distorting absurdity. Similarities and connections do exist; and certainly few have excelled Berlin's capacity to make striking, and sometimes sweeping connections and comparison, often through the use of memorable metaphors. Nevertheless, Berlin was committed to nominalism as an intellectual virtue, an antidote to the Procrustean tendency to misapply metaphors and the monist's blindness to difference, complication and the incompatibility of values.¹⁷³

Another important element in Berlin's own "sense of reality" was his individualism – his belief that individuals are more important than anything else because they are more basically, fundamentally real. Berlin's humanism was essentially and

¹⁷⁰ "Montesquieu," AC pp. 137, 150–1

¹⁷¹ The phrase is adapted from Joseph Butler, quoted in "Historical Inevitability," PSM p. 126–7 (and elsewhere); Berlin's own famous version, "Everything is what it is: liberty is liberty, and not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or a quiet conscience," is in "Two Concepts of Liberty," *Liberty* p. 172

¹⁷² Ignatieff, p. 67

¹⁷³ For an attempt to counter Berlin's nominalism, see Ronald Dworkin, "Do Liberal Values Conflict?" in Dworkin, Mark Lilla and Robert B. Silvers, eds. *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*. New York: New York Review Books, 2001. For responses to Dworkin defending Berlin's nominalism, see the essays by Bernard Williams ("Liberalism and Loss") and Charles Taylor ("Plurality of Goods"), as well as the ensuing "Discussion," in the same volume.

definitively individualistic:¹⁷⁴ he was concerned with individuals, for he saw humanity as the property of inimitable, living individuals, not larger entities.¹⁷⁵ Berlin shared what he called Herzen's "non-metaphysical, empirical, 'eudaemonistic' individualism," which was characterized by the belief that

"all that is ultimately valuable are the particular purposes of particular persons; and to trample on these is always a crime because there is, and can be, no principle or value higher than the ends of the individual, and therefore no principle in the name of which one could be permitted to do violence to or degrade or destroy individuals – the sole authors of all principles and all values."¹⁷⁶

For Berlin, social and personal morality grew out from and rested on a conception of "whatever it is for the sake of which life is considered worth living, or ... any action at all worth doing." This was a question that should be decided "by each person asking himself, in accordance with his own lights, what he should do and how he should live ... and behave to his fellows." As a result, "the ultimate and only source of authority for the rightness or wrongness of ... social action is the moral sense of the individual."¹⁷⁷

Berlin's liberalism and pluralism alike were closely tied to a belief in the equal claims to respect and the freedom to decide for themselves on the part of all individual persons, and of the primary value and importance of individuals, who alone make values valuable. This individualism was an important principle both in Berlin's general conception of reality and approach to understanding the world, and in his political and moral thought, with its emphasis on personal choice and individual liberty.

¹⁷⁴ A fact that tends to be ignored by those who, admiringly or disapprovingly, stress Berlin's emphasis on culture and belonging; see, e.g., Gray and Kateb, op.cit.

¹⁷⁵ Berlin would, I think, have agreed with Leszek Kolakowski that humanity is "a universal category, applicable to each individual human being, confirmed by the inviolability, irreplaceability, and unexchangeability of the person." Kolakowski, "Why Do We Need Kant?" in *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 53. I am thankful to my friend Mr. Joshua Safran for sharing his interest in and knowledge of Kolakowski with me.

¹⁷⁶ "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty," RT p. 112

¹⁷⁷ "Democracy, Communism and the Individual"

D. Freedom, Choice, and the Nature of the Self

*"to be free to choose, and not to be chosen for, is an inalienable ingredient in what makes human beings human."*¹⁷⁸

Berlin's ideas about the nature, and his commitment to the vital importance, of freedom or liberty were based, once again, on his ideas about human nature, or, to be more specific, the nature of the individual human self: as he himself said, "conceptions of freedom directly derive from views of what constitutes a self, a person, a man."¹⁷⁹

Berlin's own conception of the nature of the human self, as it pertains to his ideas about liberty, emphasizes the paramount reality of the empirical, individual self, the inescapable actuality of different, conflicting demands, commitments, ideals and possibilities in human existence, and the central and essential importance of choice, self-creation, self-definition and self-control to a truly and decently human life.

Berlin embraced what he described as the "individualistic" conception of man, from which had sprung, from at least the eighteenth century onwards, "every protest against exploitation and humiliation, against the encroachment of public authority, or the mass hypnosis of custom or organised propaganda." This conception is what has prompted liberal political thinkers to assert that it is vital to preserve a minimum area of freedom from interference if we are not, in Constant's words, to "degrade or deny our nature" as human beings, that is, as beings who can pursue our own ends in our own ways, who have lives of our own to live as we choose to live them.¹⁸⁰

We have seen that Berlin's view of reality was individualistic, particular, and empirical; this was, as one might expect, also true of his vision of the self. One of the cornerstones of Berlin's defense against its ideological opponents of a realistic liberalism

¹⁷⁸ "Introduction," *Five Essays on Liberty* in *Liberty* p. 52

¹⁷⁹ "Two Concepts of Liberty," (henceforth referred to as "Two Concepts") *Liberty* p. 181

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 173–5

emphasizing negative liberty was his insistence on the importance, the primary reality, of the poor, flawed, vulnerable, much-maligned empirical self.¹⁸¹

Berlin attacked the idea that there is a "true" or higher self, which is different from, superior to, and more real than, the empirical self. Such a "true" self may be identified with reason or the "higher nature" of the individual, or with a larger entity, the "whole" of which the individual is a part, and which must impose its collective will on its recalcitrant members. From this idea follows the logic of coercing people for their own sake, in order to make them do what they would want to do, and would do, if only they understood themselves and their own true needs or best interests. According to the doctrine of the higher self, human beings are "actually aiming at what in their benighted states they constantly resist, because there exists within them an occult entity," their "real" self, "of which the poor empirical self in space and time may know nothing or little", and which is "the only self that deserves to have its wishes taken into account." Those who take this view are "in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress, torture them in the name, and on behalf, of their 'real' selves,"¹⁸² "however violently our poor, ignorant, desire-ridden, passionate, empirical selves may cry out against this process."¹⁸³ The freedom that is valuable, that must be protected, is the freedom for the "true" self to realize its true wishes. Freedom is not freedom to do what is irrational, or stupid, or wrong. Therefore, coercion in the name of the true interests or nature of the self is not coercion at all; forcing recalcitrant empirical selves "into the right pattern is not tyranny, but liberation."¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ "Two Concepts," pp. 196, 199–200

¹⁸² *ibid.*, pp. 179–80

¹⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 194.

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p. 194.

Such a view – which Berlin heard expressed as correct doctrine on his visit to the Soviet Union in 1945¹⁸⁵ -- was for Berlin an utter falsehood, a perversion and reversal of the true essence of liberty based on a false view of the self.

There is no such thing as the “true”, “higher” self, which transcends the apparent self. Living, complicated, empirical selves are all that there are. Liberty consists in my being free to do what I want – and what I want is decided, with however much difficulty and internal disagreement and ambivalence and hesitancy, by me, as I actually am. I am not a unit in a larger whole. I am not an emanation of the Spirit. I am not a cog in the machine of nature. I am not a foot soldier taking part in the march of history. I am not a function of this or that determinant. My identity and perceptions may be informed by my class, my nation, my religion, my ethnic group, all the social and historical and cultural forces and groupings that come to play on me, that constitute my background and define my horizons. But I am not they, they are not me. I am a person, with an inner world, thoughts, feelings, wants, needs, of my own. I am myself. And it is I – the empirical me that thinks and breaths, that feels pain when I am injured, that is sustained by my breath and my blood, that lives in and dies with my body – who am free or not free, who must be left to decide for myself in what concerns myself. This is something no-one should deny or try to take away. To do so is false; it is monstrous; it is a violation of truth and humanity.

For Berlin freedom means the freedom of individual selves to decide for themselves, to be themselves. And this means freedom to choose, not just well or wisely, but poorly and foolishly. It is better to be free and to make mistakes than not to make mistakes at the cost of ceasing to be free: “I would rather have the right to choose to go to the bad

¹⁸⁵ See “Meetings With Russian Writers in 1945 and 1956”, PI p. 212

than no right to choose at all ... I think anyone who thinks human beings aren't like that is in some way frustrating something very essential to human beings."¹⁸⁶

Indeed, the freedom to choose, well or poorly, is what makes human beings what they are: "men are made human by their capacity for choice – choice of evil and good equally."¹⁸⁷ The essence of liberty is the ability to choose "as you wish to choose, because you wish so to choose, uncoerced, un-bullied, 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." Without this, "there is neither freedom of any kind, nor the illusion of it."¹⁸⁸ People should not be coerced, even if they are coerced in the name of virtue. It is more important that people be allowed to choose for themselves than that they hold correct opinions. Willing slaves, virtuous slaves, even happy slaves, are still slaves, and slavery is always evil.¹⁸⁹

Despite his mature and considered opinion, as a pluralist, that there is no single paramount principle which should trump or subjugate all others, his insistence that liberty was one value among many that had to sometimes give way to the others, Berlin insisted on the paramount importance of freedom. When he wrote that Herzen "wanted individual liberty more than happiness, or efficiency, or justice", and denounced anything that "would curtail the individual's capacity for the free play of fantasy, for unlimited depth and variety of personal life within a wide, rich, 'open' social milieu," he seemed to be in agreement with his hero.¹⁹⁰ This decisively anti-utilitarian humanism, with its emphasis on personal liberty, choice, honesty and autonomy, is also displayed by Berlin's own, private words to George Kennan:

¹⁸⁶ "Conversations for Tomorrow"

¹⁸⁷ "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," in *Liberty* pp. 234, 237

¹⁸⁸ *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, pp. 103–4

¹⁸⁹ "Montesquieu," AC pp. 158–9

¹⁹⁰ "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty," RT p. 104

"we ... are more concerned with making people free than making them happy; we would rather that they choose badly than not at all; because we believe that unless they choose they cannot be either happy or unhappy in any sense in which these conditions are worth having; the very notion of 'worth having' presupposes the choice of ends, a system of free preferences; and an undermining of *them* is what strikes us with such cold terror, worse than the most unjust sufferings, which nevertheless leave the possibility of knowing them for what they are – of free judgement, which makes it possible to condemn them – still open."¹⁹¹

This, again, was based on Berlin's view of human nature, what he thought most characteristic and essential, and most worthy of celebration and protection, in the characters of human beings. For Berlin, the human self is spontaneous, and has the freedom to make choices and mould its own character, and this creates the possibility of continuous novelty, which is "what is most characteristic and most human in men", who are by nature incomplete and self-transforming.¹⁹² "Life is neither good nor bad, men are what they make themselves ... Our ends are not made for us, but by us."¹⁹³

Since human beings have the power to define themselves by the choices that they make, choosing – and being able to choose – are central to human life and identity. Following Kant, Berlin believed that every individual possesses the capacity to choose what to be and do, however narrow the limits within which the area of choice may lie, however hemmed in by circumstances individuals may be. There must be some room, some capacity for choice; for

"all love and respect rests upon the attribution of conscious motives in this sense ... all the categories, the concepts, in terms of which we think about and act towards one another – goodness, badness, integrity and lack of it, the attribution of dignity or honour to others which we must not insult or exploit, the entire cluster of ideas such as honesty, purity of motive, courage, sense of truth, sensibility, compassion, justice; and on the other side, brutality, falseness, wickedness, ruthlessness, lack of scruple, corruption, lack of feelings, emptiness ... all this becomes meaningless unless we think of human beings as capable of

¹⁹¹ "Letter to George Kennan," *Liberty*, p. 342

¹⁹² "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," in *Liberty* pp. 234, 237

¹⁹³ "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty," RT p. 100

pursuing ends for their own sakes by deliberate acts of choice – which alone makes nobility noble and sacrifices sacrifices."¹⁹⁴

Indeed, choice is so important to the nature of human beings, that to rob individuals of their capacity to choose, to think for and as themselves, is to so totally violate their nature that it is positively sacrilegious, "the real sin against the Holy Ghost":

Everything else is bearable so long as the possibility of goodness – of a state of affairs in which men freely choose, disinterestedly seeks ends for their own sake – is still open, however much suffering they may have gone through. Their souls are destroyed only when this is no longer possible. It is when the desire for choice is broken that what men do thereby loses all moral value ... that is what is meant by destroying people's self-respect ... This is the ultimate horror because in such a situation there are no worthwhile motives left: nothing is worth doing or avoiding, the reasons for existing are gone"¹⁹⁵

The political implication of this view of human nature emphasizing free choice is that "no power, but only rights, can be regarded as absolute, so that all men, whatever power governs them, have an absolute right to refuse to behave inhumanly."¹⁹⁶ Berlin's liberalism, which is so closely intertwined with, and owes so much of its ardor to, his humanism, thus rests on the firmest of foundations: human nature itself.

The importance of the freedom to choose stems not only from the nature of the human self, but also from the nature of human values. This brings us to pluralism. One of the reasons that freedom of choice is not a mere luxury to be coveted, nor a right to be safeguarded, but a necessity to a truly human life – and why it is not a temporary or instrumental goal, but an end in itself – is that life by its nature forces us to make choices between and among different values, duties, and desires. The ends of human beings are multiple and multifarious; many are in principle incompatible. Therefore "the possibility of conflict – and of tragedy – can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either

¹⁹⁴ "Letter to George Kennan," *Liberty*, p. 337

¹⁹⁵ *ibid.* pp. 339–40

¹⁹⁶ "Two Concepts," p. 211

personal or social. The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition."¹⁹⁷

If Berlin's own version of humanism, with its strong emphasis on choice and variety, and its decidedly tragic inflection, was defined by his commitment to liberalism and pluralism, he also embraced liberalism and pluralism out of a commitment to humanism. He embraced pluralism, with the minimum degree of freedom from interference and coercion which was essential to it as "a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of 'positive' self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind." Pluralism was truer in recognizing the fact that human goals are many, and not always compatible, nor commensurable on a single scale; that human beings are free agents, and that making moral decisions is an activity that can only be carried out by human beings exercising their own judgment; there are no short-cuts, no slide-rules or rule-books that can do the job for us. Pluralism was more humane because

"it does not (as the system-builders do) deprive men, in the name of some remote, or incoherent, ideal, of much that they have found to be indispensable to their life as unpredictably self-transforming human beings. In the end, men choose between ultimate values; they choose as they do because their life and thought are determined by fundamental moral categories and concepts that are ... a part of their being and thought and sense of their own identity; part of what makes them human."¹⁹⁸

For Berlin, pluralism pointed the way to the humanistic principles, ideals, and aspirations from which he started, while liberalism provided a safeguard against the dehumanizing and degrading forces which, as a humanist, he most feared.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ "Two Concepts," p. 214

¹⁹⁸ "Two Concepts," pp. 216–17.

¹⁹⁹ It is not, of course, necessary to be a humanist in order to be a pluralist (or vice versa); humanism and pluralism, like liberalism and pluralism, while complimentary and mutually supporting, in no way logically entail one another. One can, as John Gray has demonstrated, be a

Berlin defended liberty because it was a necessary condition for varied, multiform, unpredictable, complicated and conflicted beings who are not constructed along the neat, symmetrical lines demanded by systems and fanatics, but are constituted out of the "crooked timber of humanity." Berlin's humanism called not only for the safeguarding of this "crooked timber" – though that was certainly his paramount political concern – but also for its celebration. Complexity and conflict, the pain of confusion and loss, the dissatisfaction bred by constant compromise and perpetual imperfection, the irritation caused by the maddening eccentricity and perversity that cannot be fully separated from variety and freedom, were conditions not to be escaped or suppressed or denied. They should be embraced, not without regret, not without recognizing the genuine pain that they cause, and the very real costs they impose, but as an often positive and always necessary part of our most precious and essential possession: our humanity.

III. PUTTING THE PERSON BACK IN: Berlin's Lessons and Legacy

*"all the works of men are above all voices speaking, are not objects detached from their makers, are part of a living process of communication between persons and not independently existing entities"*²⁰⁰

A. 'The Proper Study of Mankind': The Idea of Understanding and the Practice of the Human Sciences

*"In describing human behaviour it has always been artificial and over-austere to omit questions of character, purposes and motives of individuals."*²⁰¹

pluralist, while strongly renouncing humanism. But while pluralism in the abstract does not imply or require humanism, the particular pluralism that Berlin espoused, and the only pluralism that he would likely regard as worthy of upholding, is distinctly and definitively humanist in inspiration. Berlin would, I suspect, be no more in favor of sacrificing individual human beings on the altar of pluralism, than on any other.

²⁰⁰ "Herder and the Enlightenment," PSM 367

²⁰¹ "Historical Inevitability," PSM p. 122

Just as Berlin's constant moral concern was to defend living, individual human beings – their value, their importance, their dignity, their liberty – in all of their complexity and unpredictability, his central intellectual commitment was to understand the same human beings, with the same concerns in mind. It was this that led him to embrace a conception of human understanding as empathy; and it was this that influenced his particular conception of the purpose of the study of the human sciences.

Berlin's view of the purpose of human sciences is humanistic in the sense of being human-centered; however, this in itself tells us little. Most of the human sciences are human-centered; but those who practice them have very different conceptions of how human beings should be understood.

It is here that the term "personal" becomes useful. For Berlin, human beings should be studied and understood as persons – as complex, three-dimensional, particular individuals with their own rich inner lives, living in the world, responding to and interpreting and within limits remolding and re-imagining their own realm of experience and reality. We should seek to understand them as we (if we are at all personally curious) try to understand ourselves and those personally close to us.

The study of history, for instance, should be concerned with "what men did and thought and suffered."²⁰² The historian is properly concerned with "purposes, feelings, hopes, fears ... to understand past cultures is to understand what these people were after."²⁰³ We must ask ourselves what experiences lie behind, and are presupposed by, the language that people use, the thoughts they think and the things they do; we must visualize or "enter into' the minds" of those whose actions and worlds we seek to

²⁰² "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities," AC 195; see also *ibid.*, p. 105

²⁰³ *Conversations*, pp. 79–80.

understand.²⁰⁴ Such knowledge is "like the knowledge we claim of a friend, of his character, of his ways of thought or action ... the nuances of personality or feeling or ideas," an understanding that requires imaginative power and sensitivity.

We are able to understand the motives and emotions of others because "we are ourselves human, and understand our own inner life ... we ... know why we are what we are, what we seek, what frustrates us, what expresses our inmost feelings and beliefs."²⁰⁵

Berlin followed Herder in seeing understanding as a matter of empathy, "the ability to enter into beliefs, feelings and attitudes alien and at times acutely antipathetic" to one's own.²⁰⁶ To understand others is "to grasp what [they] were at – not merely to describe the gestures, but to reveal the intention behind them – that is, tell us what their words, movements, gestures meant to themselves"²⁰⁷

To seek to understand what people in the past thought, how they came to think it and why, and how what they thought affected their lives and those of others – that is, to practice intellectual history – is therefore to try to "enter into" their particular, personal mental processes, as far as we can; it is, within the limits imposed by our own abilities and the evidence, to try to get to know them as people, to re-enact their thoughts and feelings within ourselves. This is what Berlin himself sought to do in his own historical work, and exhorted other intellectual historians to do.²⁰⁸ When Berlin himself was working on Marx – whose personality and philosophy were deeply antipathetic to Berlin's own – he tried, he later recalled,

²⁰⁴ "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities," AC p. 99

²⁰⁵ "My Intellectual Path," POI p. 7

²⁰⁶ "Fathers and Children," RT p. 263

²⁰⁷ "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth Century European Thought," CTH p. 75. See also: "Herder and the Enlightenment," PSM p. 383; "The Concept of Scientific History," PSM pp. 38–9, 43–5, 48–49; "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" PSM pp. 85, 87

²⁰⁸ See, e.g., *Conversations*, p. 24

"to imagine what it was like to be Karl Marx ... It was the same thing with Vico and Herder, Herzen, Tolstoy, Sorel, whoever. How were their ideas born? In what particular time, place, society? ... you must ask yourself what bothered them, what made them torment themselves over these issues. How did their theories or writings mature in their heads? One cannot talk about ideas in complete abstraction, unhistorically; but neither can one talk solely in terms of concrete historical milieux, as if ideas made no sense outside of their frameworks ... this is a complex, imprecise, psychologically demanding, imagination-requiring field of enquiry"²⁰⁹

As this passage indicates, such understanding requires both empathic insight, and an awareness of, and emphasis, on particulars. What Berlin called the "historical sense" requires a "concentrated interest in particular events or persons or situations as such, and not as instances of a generalization," as well as a sense of the unique ways in which various factors interact in a concrete situation. So, too, with politics: political wisdom is not a technique that can be derived from a doctrine, or taught, or abstracted from accumulated data as scientific knowledge can be; it is understanding rather than knowledge, the ability to know, based on the available facts, what fits with what, and what doesn't.²¹⁰

To understand human behavior in any sphere requires the skills that are necessary in interacting with other human beings on a personal level: empathy, a sensitivity to one's own emotions and those of others, an understanding of how these emotions interact in a particular situation and how they affect an individual life.²¹¹ It requires a keen perception of the "unique flavours of each situation as it is, in its

²⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. 28

²¹⁰ "The Sense of Reality," SR p. 34

²¹¹ "The Concept of Scientific History," PSM pp. 54, 56–7. Berlin in this respect anticipates much of the content – if not the terminology or approach – of recent research into what some psychologists have termed "social and emotional competences" (a phrasing that Berlin would likely deplore.) See Daniel Goleman, "An EI-based theory of performance" in C. Cherniss and D. Goleman, *The Emotionally Intelligent Workplace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), pp. 27–44. I am grateful to my father, Prof. Cary Cherniss, for informing me about some of the academic work on this subject – and for his own, more personal work in this area.

specific differences – of that in it wherein it differs from all other situations ... that element in it which no generalisation ... can cover."²¹²

In practicing history, or any of the other human sciences,²¹³ it is important to focus empathically and attentively on the inner lives and characters of human beings – to put human beings first in consideration, even if impersonal forces are also considered, and conceptual tools and models employed (as Berlin acknowledged they should be – but never in a way, or to an extent, to badly warp or obliterate what we know to be specifically and essentially human and personal). Putting people first was, however, much more than a methodological principle: it was also an important matter of political judgment and moral conduct.

B. What Are We To Be and Do?:²¹⁴ The Purposes of Politics, the Possibilities of Personality

*"All problems depend to some degree upon the ways in which people think and act"*²¹⁵

On a political level, Berlin's humanism supports the pursuit of modest goals, and discourages the dreams of utopianism. Since Berlin's is a particularly pluralist humanism, there can be no single ultimate arbitrating and directing principle of action; however, Berlin's humanism does insist that we concentrate on the ways that political actions affect actual human beings, that we pursue programs and policies that will protect and

²¹² "The Sense of Reality," SR p. 24

²¹³ Although I have here focused on Berlin's prescriptions for the practice of history, he also applied these views to other disciplines, such as political science: e.g. his declaration that to understand political ideologies and movements "is, above all, to understand the ideas or attitudes to life involved in them, which alone make such movements a part of human history ... Political words and notions and acts are not intelligible save in the context of the issues that divide the men who use them." "Two Concepts," p. 168

²¹⁴ This is an adaptation of a title of an unpublished essay by Henry Hardy, which itself is an adaptation of a quote by Isaiah Berlin of Fichte.

²¹⁵ "Philosophy and Government Repression," SR p. 69

further human liberty, dignity, well-being and flourishing; and avoid those actions that will cause avoidable human suffering, that will enslave or humiliate human beings.

The first purpose of normal human societies is to survive; after that, it is to satisfy at least a minimum number of men's most basic needs and desires – to guarantee them a minimum of security, freedom, happiness, justice.²¹⁶ Goals should be modest, and should be pursued with humility and skeptical caution, but ardently, and with determination. We should not expect too much; but neither should we give up too easily:

“If we can feed the hungry, clothe the naked, extend the area of individual liberty, fight injustice, create the minimum conditions of a decent society, if we can generate a modicum of toleration, of legal and social equality, if we can provide methods of solving social problems without facing men with intolerable alternatives – that would be a very, very great deal.”

We must resist both despair, and the temptations of Utopian eschatology and dogmatic certainty.²¹⁷

Berlin's humanistic politics, then, is not a recipe for defeatist conservatism.²¹⁸ It denies us the comforts both of certainty and visionary optimism, and of self-indulgent resignation, cynicism, and callousness. It demands both caution, and daring, a willingness to take risks and to take responsibility:

“Priorities, never final and absolute, must be established. The first public obligation is to avoid extremes of suffering ... We may take the risk of drastic action, in personal life or in public policy, but we must always be aware, never forget, that we may be mistaken, that certainty about the effect of such measures invariably leads to avoidable suffering of the innocent ... The best that can be done, as a general rule, is to maintain a precarious equilibrium that will prevent the occurrence of desperate situations, of intolerable choices – that is the first requirement of a decent society; one that we can always strive for, in the light of the limited range of our knowledge, and even of our imperfect understanding of individuals and societies. A certain humility in these matters is very necessary ... we must decide as we decide; moral risk cannot, at times, be avoided.”²¹⁹

²¹⁶ See “The Soviet Intelligentsia,” *op.cit.*, p. 23

²¹⁷ “The Three Strands in My Life,” PI p.257; see also “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” CTH p. 14

²¹⁸ Contra Russell Jacoby, “On Isaiah Berlin,” *Salmagundi* 55 (Winter 1982).

²¹⁹ “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” CTH pp. 17–18

This sort of modest, anti-Utopian, humanistic liberalism demands effort and vigilance: "[P]reserving an uneasy equilibrium, which is constantly threatened and in constant need of repair ... is the precondition for decent societies and morally acceptable behaviour, otherwise we are bound to lose our way." "We can only do what we can: but that we must do, against difficulties."²²⁰

A good inhabitant of a truly liberal, humanistic society will believe that

"decent respect for others and the toleration of dissent are better than pride and a sense of national mission; that liberty may be incompatible with, and better than, too much efficiency; that pluralism and untidiness are ... better than the rigorous imposition of all-embracing systems, no matter how rational and disinterested, or than the rule of majorities against which there is no appeal."

Such a society will recognize certain human needs, and humane principles, as necessary. Though compromises and sacrifices must be made, certain violations of human rights will be absolutely prohibited, for "there are frontiers, not artificially drawn, within which men should be inviolable," frontiers based on human nature itself. When these frontiers are violated – when people are found guilty without fair trial, when "children are ordered to denounce their parents, friends to betray one another, soldiers to use methods of barbarism; when men are tortured or murdered, or minorities massacred because they irritate a majority or a tyrant," we feel revulsion and horror, because we recognize, if only viscerally and tacitly, the validity "of some absolute barriers to the imposition of one man's will on another."²²¹

These goals– the preservation of certain inviolable standards protecting human beings, and the furtherance, within reasonable and necessary limits, of human aspirations and ideals, the cultivation of decent behavior and decent standards of living – are at once modest, and extremely rigorous (or so, at least, it would appear, given the failure of most people and most societies throughout history to live up to them); "Not to trample on

²²⁰ *ibid.* p. 19

²²¹ "Two Concepts," p. 211

other people, however difficult they are, is not everything; but it is a very, very great deal."²²²

Humanistic politics is concerned not only with pursuing humane goals; it also demands that they be pursued in a humane way. The refusal to engage in cynical and brutal behavior in pursuit of his goals was what Berlin most admired in Chaim Weizmann, the political figure with whom he was most closely associated.²²³ Weizmann was not only great, but admirable, because he

*"did not attempt to save his people by violence or cunning – to beat them into shape, if need be with the utmost brutality ... or deceive them for their own good ... or turn their heads with promises of blessings awaiting them in some remote future ... He never called upon the Jews to make terrible sacrifices, or offer their lives, or commit crimes, or condone the crimes of others ... nor did he play upon their feelings unscrupulously, or try deliberately to exacerbate them, against this or that real, or imaginary, enemy, as extremists in his own movement have frequently tried to do. He wished to make his nation free and happy, but not at the price of sinning against any human value in which he and they believed."*²²⁴

Weizmann neither condoned "the abandonment of ultimate principles before the claims of expediency or of anything else;" nor did he fall into "political monasticism", a search for some safe refuge where one could avoid being disappointed or tarnished, the adhering to some "inner voice, or some unbreakable principle too pure for the wicked public world"; he found this to be a "foolish and despicable" mixture of "weakness and self-conceit."²²⁵ He wanted the Jewish people to be able to lead "*a life worthy of human beings*, without betraying their own ideals or trampling on those of others."²²⁶

Similarly, Berlin praised Franklin Roosevelt for showing that it was possible "to be politically effective yet benevolent and human." By doing so, Roosevelt not only helped to defeat Nazism, but to disprove the assumption, common to Nazis and

²²² "The Three Strands in My Life," PI pp. 257–8

²²³ See Ignatieff, pp. 105–7, 115–18, 123–4, 178–82, 219

²²⁴ "Chaim Weizmann," PI pp. 48–9

²²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 54

Communists, that gaining and retaining political power required ruthlessness, sacrifice and despotism. His example strengthened democracy when it appeared on the brink of defeat, and showed that the totalitarian estimate of politics and of human nature was false. Roosevelt aimed at "the promotion of the most generous possible fulfillment of the largest possible number of human wishes;" and he did so in a canny, creative, yet not unprincipled way that gave hope to all who shared his goals.²²⁷

Weizmann and Roosevelt were models, not only of a humanistic approach to politics, but also of a humanistic temper that embraced life; and Berlin admired them both as political figures, and as personalities. Berlin was aware that, while politics was about more than personality, personality was nevertheless an important political, and moral, issue: Berlin's project of putting the person back in involved returning to considerations both of political leadership or statesmanship, and of character generally.

Berlin had a strong feeling and respect for "the style of free beings" – honesty, generosity, uncalculating feeling, nobility, pride, independence. He admired defiance of unjust, complacent or irrational authority, swimming against the current, however eccentric the form in which it manifests itself, even if it verges on the boorish or the quixotic.²²⁸ He felt affection for those who are motivated by exalted ideals and sentiments, even if they care far too violently; but he also admired quiet, gentle, scrupulous, fastidious characters, who carefully cultivate integrity and probity, who live by the highest standards and are sensitive to the feelings and needs of others. He admired both moral courage, and moral charm.²²⁹

²²⁶ "ibid., pp. 48–9; emphasis added

²²⁷ "Franklin Delano Roosevelt," PI pp. 27, 32–3

²²⁸ "Alexander Herzen," RT pp. 200, 203

²²⁹ For Berlin's expression, through Herzen, of his moral ideals, see "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty," RT pp. 87–8.

Berlin had a special affection for lively, vivid characters who embraced life in all its variety and idiosyncrasy, and who brought out unique gifts and a capacity for enjoyment in others. Thus, for example, of his sometime mentor Maurice Bowra, Berlin wrote: "All his life he liked freedom, individuality, independence, and detested everything that seemed to him to cramp and constrict the forces of human vitality." Berlin was grateful to Bowra for his liberating influence, which "made for truth, human feeling, as well as great mental exhilaration."²³⁰ In the same vein, he praised Churchill's "uncommon love for life, aversion for the imposition of rigid disciplines upon the teeming variety of human relations ... instinctive sense of what promotes and what retards or distorts growth and vitality."²³¹ Berlin similarly appreciated Felix Frankfurter's "Courage, candour, honesty, intelligence, love of intelligence in others, interest in ideas, lack of pretension, vitality, gaiety ... sharp sense of the ridiculous, warmth of heart, generosity – intellectual as well as emotional – dislike for the pompous, the bogus, the self-important, the *bien-pensant*, for conformity and cowardice" and shared his passion "for all that was sane, refined, not shoddy, civilised, moderate, peaceful, the opposite of brutal, decent ... for all that ensured the dignity and liberty of human beings."²³²

Yet Berlin also praised the quiet scholar John Petrov Plamenatz, a "deeply civilised" and "saintly" man who "was interested in the character of others, and sensitive to their feelings, particularly to the feelings of those who, like himself, wished to walk by themselves and found it difficult to fit in with established social patterns ... He understood loneliness, unhappiness, vulnerability."²³³ And, like Weizmann, he admired England for its "moderation, the civilised disdain of extremes ... the lack of cruelty, of

²³⁰ "Maurice Bowra," PI, pp. 152, 156

²³¹ "Winston Churchill in 1940," PI, p. 17

²³² "Felix Frankfurter at Oxford," PI, pp.114, 118–19

²³³ "John Petrov Plamenatz," PI p. 147

excitement, of shoddiness ... the wayward imagination, the love of the odd and the idiosyncratic, the taste for eccentricity, the quality of independence."²³⁴

Although these various qualities and tastes were rarely to be found in a single human being (though Berlin himself possessed a great many of them), they were all humanistic virtues: they were all conducive to appreciating, understanding, respecting, helping, liberating, and celebrating, other human beings; they were all psychological defenses against dogmatism, fanaticism, and callousness. As such, they supported and safeguarded the sort of morality, the sort of society, and the sort of life, that Berlin valued. But their value was anything but purely instrumental: for such values, and the human lives that they defined, were themselves the ends, the purpose, of such a morality, such a society, and such a life.

C. Conclusion: Putting the Person Back In

*"If we are to hope to understand the often violent world in which we live ... we cannot confine our attention to the great impersonal forces ... which act upon us. The goals and motives that guide human action must be looked at in the light of all that we know and understand; their roots and growth, their essence, and above all their validity, must be critically examined ..."*²³⁵

Berlin not only insisted on the importance of attending to human beings as a matter of moral and methodological principle. He also practiced it as a way of thinking, a way of writing, a way of life. His principles and personality were in harmony; he was not only a humanist, he was humane. What is most valuable in Berlin is also what is most personal; his greatest insights and most compelling writings are reflections of his own experiences and his inimitable character. This is not insignificant for his work; it is essential to it. Many of those who knew him commented on Berlin's uncanny capacity for focusing on and understanding human character and temperament, both in life and in his work. His former student and successor at Oxford, G.A. Cohen, wrote that "It is not

²³⁴ "Chaim Weizmann," PI p. 56.

²³⁵ "The Pursuit of the Ideal," CTH, p. 2

... a theory that Isaiah expounds, but a thinker, a human being, a mental temper displayed not only in a theory but in a life. Isaiah goes for what animates the person, for his governing passion and consequent bent."²³⁶ His American friends Jonathan Lieberson and Sidney Morgenbesser wrote that Berlin "approaches ideas as incarnated in the men who conceived them; his subjects are never mere vehicles;"²³⁷ while Joseph Brodsky succinctly and aptly stated that "others' lives are this man's forte."²³⁸

All of his essays are personal impressions, concerned with other human beings, and written in a distinctively human voice. This aspect of his work, because it is much harder to convey on an abstract level and through repetition – because it must, ultimately, be experienced by reading Berlin's work itself – has been much mentioned, but little analyzed, in estimations and examinations of Berlin's thought. Yet the portraits of Herzen and Montesquieu, or of Herder and Hess, or Churchill and Roosevelt, as individual personalities with complex and vivid characters, are as important to Berlin's essays on these figures as the more philosophically oriented discussions of their ideas, influence and importance.

These personal portraits are characteristic and expressive of Berlin's uniqueness as a thinker and writer, and thus represent a large part of what is distinctive in his work and valuable in his legacy. There are many fine historians of ideas; but few write with Berlin's psychological acuity, few are able to combine an explication of what is notable and important in a thinker's intellectual contributions, or a leader's political achievements, with a sense, at once vivid and nuanced, colorful and sensitive, of the inner world, the personal dynamic, behind the thought or action. And, as a humanist whose sympathies were wide and generous as well as ardent (though never credulous)

²³⁶ "Isaiah's Marx, and Mine," in Margalit and Margalit, *op.cit.*, pp. 118–19

²³⁷ "Isaiah Berlin," in *ibid.*, p. 2

²³⁸ Brodsky, *op.cit.*, in *ibid.*, p. 214

and acute, Berlin lavished as much revivifying power and evocative ability on minor, misunderstood and difficult figures – obscure Oxford dons, cloistered and quarrelsome scholars, quixotic and eccentric thinkers who swam “against the current” and as a result were taken to have never gotten very far – as he did on gigantic, historically significant figures.²³⁹

Berlin’s ideas about pluralism have much to teach us about the nature of the world that we inhabit, and how to deal with it; his defense of liberty and moderation against political fanaticism and tyranny remain, in today’s world, timely, and indeed urgent. But his humanism has something else to teach us, something less easily encapsulated in a political position or philosophical system, about how to approach, understand, and behave towards our fellow men and women.

Berlin’s insistence on and attention to what is vitally human and importantly personal, and his putting of this at the center of reflections on human experience and behavior, is especially valuable to, and needed by, the contemporary academy. The state of our intellectual life has not changed significantly, for all the fashions that have come and gone in the interim, since Noel Annan depicted it in his introduction to Berlin’s *Personal Impressions*. Now, as then, social scientists have depersonalized human experience, often reducing the analysis of human beings to that of rational decision-makers whose behavior will be easily susceptible to mathematical models, seeing human beings as

²³⁹ For Berlin’s gift for resurrecting neglected figures see, e.g., his wonderful portraits of Hess and Herder as men in “The Life and Opinions of Moses Hess,” AC, especially pp. 219, 241–243, 250–1; and “Herder and the Enlightenment,” PSM, especially p. 423–4 n.1. It is a psychologically obtuse reader who comes away from these essays without a grateful sense that he or she has come to know something of these individuals as they actually were as people, and been personally enriched in the process. (For the response of one such reader, see Russell Jacoby, *op.cit.* Similarly blind to the value, and significance, of the essays collected in *Personal Impressions*, but at least appreciative of Berlin’s feel for personality in his “historical” work, is Brian Barry’s discussion of Berlin, *op. cit.*, p. 7)

entirely defined and determined by genes or memes; while scholars in the humanities, enraptured by post-modernism, avoid considering living people actually speaking and thinking and writing, and indeed declare the self to be dead or disintegrating or a fiction; the history of ideas and political theory are often reduced to the play of abstractions, and their subject matter is thus not only misunderstood, but actually mislaid.

Berlin stands opposed to all this; and therefore remains deeply important, and deeply unfashionable. As Annan noted,

“His thought, his theories, always refer to people; the very life he leads pulsates with people. Nobody else in our time has invested ideas with such personality; no one has given them corporeal shape and breathed life into them more than Berlin; and he succeeds in doing so because ideas are for him not mere abstractions. They live – how else could they live? – in the minds of men and women, inspiring them, shaping their lives, influencing their actions and changing the course of history. But it is the men and women who create these ideas and embody them ... No one can understand ideas unless he sees them as the expression of the passions, desires, longings and frustrations of human beings; and the word ‘life’ itself has no meaning unless it calls to mind men and women – past, present and to come.”²⁴⁰

Berlin’s attention is always devoted to individual, real men and women living in particular situations. This is what separates him not only from those who were blind or hostile to his brand of humanism, but also from those who embraced a similarly humanistic position but, under the influence of Kant, expound and defend an abstract vision of human beings as “subjects.” Although Berlin unquestionably agrees with Kant’s insistence that human beings are subjects rather than objects, and invokes this Kantian phraseology on occasion, to think in terms of “the subject” is too abstract. Talk of “subjects” is an abstract, and inferior, way of talking about what are really individual people, each of whom is a unique personality, a particular person.²⁴¹

There are humanists who are devoted to “humanity”, and there are humanists who are devoted to human beings, to living individuals. Berlin was of the latter camp; thus his praise of Moses Hess for insisting, within a “dogmatic and intolerant milieu”,

²⁴⁰ Annan, “Introduction” to PI, pp. xv–xvi, xx–xxi, xxxii

that the men who were striving to change the world must feel "benevolence and love towards individual human beings and not merely humanity at large."²⁴² Berlin was one of the greatest connoisseurs and champions of human personality of his time; his work derives its effervescence from a joyful delight in the vagaries and miracles of human personality, and it derives its weight, its undercurrent of somberness and its over-arching and guiding moral seriousness, from his sharp awareness of the dangers faced and horrors suffered by human beings in his own day, and the tragedy to which they must always be prone.

Berlin therefore speaks urgently and resoundingly to us when he reminds us that

"to ignore motives and the context in which they arose, the range of possibilities as they stretched before the actors, ... the spectrum of human thought and imagination ... to try to reduce the behaviour of individuals to that of impersonal 'social forces' not further analysable into the conduct of the men who ... make history is 'reification' of statistics, a form of 'false consciousness' of bureaucrats and administrators, who close their eyes to all that proves incapable of quantification, and thereby perpetrate absurdities in theory and dehumanisation in practice."²⁴³

This mention of dehumanization in practice brings us back to where we began our journey, and Berlin his: the horrors of the century just past, horrors that, at the writing of this essay, seem unlikely to remain confined to the past. Berlin reminds us of the dangers of dehumanization on both an intellectual or theoretical level, and a practical, political one; and he reminds us that the two cannot be divorced, that the defense of human life and humane values relies upon a humanistic conception of human beings, and that to embrace – or toy with – intellectual abstractions that seek to do away with the difficulties of being human, however seductive and fascinating and gratifying to the curiosity or vanity of their authors they may be, is both to commit an intellectual fallacy

²⁴¹ I am thankful to my friend Mr. Robert Stockman for clarifying my thinking on this topic, and reminding me of its importance.

²⁴² "The Life and Opinions of Moses Hess," AC pp. 247–8

²⁴³ "Introduction," to *Five Essays on Liberty in Liberty*, pp. 26–7; see also *ibid*, p. 23, and "The Concept of Scientific History," PSM p. 47

masquerading as sophistication, and to fall into a moral failure by fleeing reality and responsibility. Berlin calls us back to the complex, rich, and demanding reality of human beings, and our responsibilities to respect and protect and understand them.²⁴⁴ His greatest relevance and most vital legacy as a practitioner of political theory and intellectual history is that he reminds us of an essential, and too-often neglected truth: that

“All we can know for certain is what men actually want. Let us at least have the courage of our admitted ignorance, of our doubts and uncertainties. At least we can try to discover what others ... require, by taking off the spectacles of tradition, prejudice, dogma, and making it possible for ourselves to know men as they truly are, by listening to them carefully and sympathetically, and understanding them and their lives and their needs, one by one individually. Let us at least provide them with what they ask for, and leave them as free as possible.”²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ For an appeal to the contemporary profession of political science to put human concerns and needs back at the center of inquiry, see Rogers M. Smith, “Putting the Substance Back in Political Science,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 5 2002, Section 2, pp. B10–B11. The similarity between Professor Smith’s title and that of this section of this essay – and the affinity between the arguments contained therein – is purely, and delightfully, coincidental.

²⁴⁵ “Tolstoy and Enlightenment,” RT p. 258.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Throughout the preceding essay, I have used abbreviations for the books by Berlin that I have cited frequently. Explanations of these abbreviations and full bibliographical details follow. Details of other works by Berlin, and secondary works, cited are given in the footnotes.

AC:

Isaiah Berlin. *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*. Edited by Henry Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Conversations:

Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahanbegloo. *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991

CTH:

Isaiah Berlin. *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. Edited by Henry Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998

Liberty:

Isaiah Berlin. *Liberty*. Edited by Henry Hardy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

PI:

Isaiah Berlin. *Personal Impressions*. Edited by Henry Hardy. Second Edition. London: Pimlico, 1998

POI:

Isaiah Berlin. *The Power of Ideas* Edited by Henry Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000

PSM:

Isaiah Berlin. *The Proper Study of Mankind*. Edited by Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1997.

RT:

Isaiah Berlin. *Russian Thinkers*. Edited by Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly. New York: Penguin, 1978.

SR:

Isaiah Berlin. *The Sense of Reality*. Edited by Henry Hardy. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1996

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Acknowledgments are usually the proper preserve of books, or at least articles, and not undergraduate essays, even overly long ones. However, it seems appropriate, in an essay that concerns itself with the personal, to acknowledge my personal debts and render thanks to those to whom I owe them, and without whom this paper could not have been written (as well as to those without whom I would have finished it long ago). And, in any event, doing so is too great a pleasure to resist.

I am grateful above all to Steven Smith, who has nurtured my interest in Berlin, and political philosophy generally, has overseen and guided my work, and has provided consistent support, encouragement, camaraderie and provocation for the whole of my undergraduate career; and to Henry Hardy, for encouraging my work on Berlin, giving me access to Berlin's unpublished writings, giving of his own time to provide much welcome and unfailingly perceptive yet (sometimes perhaps excessively) generous advice and feedback on my ideas and writings, and making work on our common obsession a truly lively, invigorating, and enjoyable experience; I also owe Dr. Hardy the great debt of gratitude that all who admire Berlin and have benefited from his work do. Prof. Smith and Dr. Hardy have also provided examples of scholarly probity and intellectual acuity which have been an inspiration, and a challenge to emulation. I am similarly grateful to have benefited from the insight, knowledge, high intellectual and personal standards, careful interest and warm generosity of Howard Stern, Jennifer Pitts, Cyrus Hamlin, Robert Wokler, Dave Marcus, Gerry Cohen, Hilary Fink, Frank Turner, Ala Alryyes, and Jane Levin.

My feelings for and debt to my parents are too deep and pervasive to be expressed; I owe them everything, and am grateful for them (and for their help in editing this essay, as well). Also difficult to express (and not appropriate to do so here) is how much my friends at Yale have meant to me. I will therefore merely say that my life for the past four years would have been a very sad thing without them. I would like to thank all of them collectively for the pleasures of their company and conversation, and also thank, for particular help along the way to writing this essay: Alison Hornstein, Allen Dickerson (with special thanks for many a late-night writing session), Andrew Koss, Belina Mizrahi, Chiansan Ma (with special thanks for reading a draft of this essay, and improving my prose), Debbie Potvin, Emily Pressman, Jacob Remes, Jeremy Brandman, Jon Markowitz, Josh Safran, Julie Saltman, Kate Tsyvkin, Noam Schimmel, Becca Benefiel, Rob Stockman, Shayna Strom, and Susannah Camic (who has a great deal to do with these acknowledgments being written).

No student could wish for a better subject, or a wiser guide, than Isaiah Berlin. I am glad to have discovered his work; and I thank those (especially Joe Stringer, Carol Lefelt and Steve Heisler) who encouraged me to pursue this, and other, peculiar interests early on.

I am grateful to Gary Haller and the other members of the committee that awarded me the Lewis P. Curtis Travel Fellowship for the Summer of 2001; and to the family of the late Lewis P. Curtis for endowing the award. I fondly remember the warm hospitality of all of those who welcomed me during my time at Oxford: I am particularly grateful in this regard to Serena Moore and Joey Fishkin, as well as several individuals mentioned elsewhere in these acknowledgements; and to Wolfson College.

Since I have self-indulgently saddled this paper with these acknowledgments, I will continue to yield to temptation, and dedicate it as well. In working on the "personal" nature of Berlin's work, I have been fortunate to meet several individuals, each remarkable in his or her own right, who knew Berlin well; through their generosity in meeting and discussing Berlin with me, they provided a very personal link to the subject, and reminded me what is of value, and what at stake, in this work. I dedicate this essay to four of their number: Aline Berlin; Jean Floud; Stuart Hampshire; and Jenifer Hart.