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Hedgehog and Fox

In one of his most famous essays, Isaiah Berlin quotes a fragment from the Greek poet Archilochus: 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing' (*RT*, 22). For Berlin, these words suggest a profound distinction between two kinds of artist or thinker. On the one hand there are those who, like the hedgehog, 'relate everything to a single central vision, one system less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel'. On the other hand there are the foxes, 'those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory', who think 'on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, inner vision' (*RT*, 22). The hedgehogs, in Berlin's judgement, include Dante, Plato, Lucretius, Pascal, Hegel and others, while Shakespeare, Herodotus, Aristotle and Montaigne are foxes.

Is Berlin himself a hedgehog or a fox? His reference to the way in which the unitary vision of the hedgehog can become 'fanatical' hints at what may be said to be Berlin's official line: it is safer to follow the fox; beware the hedgehog. The contrast between hedgehog and fox is a metaphor for the crucial distinction at the heart of Berlin's thought, between monism and pluralism in moral and political philosophy: between, that is, the monist view that there is a single right way of answering any moral or political question, and the pluralist view that basic human goods are multiple, conflicting

and incommensurable. Monism, Berlin believes, harbours dangers that pluralism avoids. Berlin, the pluralist, thus tends to present himself as a fox, and certainly he knows many things. As his biographer Michael Ignatieff writes, 'no other major figure in twentieth-century Anglo-American letters made contributions across such a range of disciplines: in analytical philosophy, in the intellectual history of Marxism, the Enlightenment, and the Counter-Enlightenment, and in liberal political theory'.¹

Yet Berlin is also, and perhaps more deeply, a hedgehog. The great bulk of his work, however varied its immediate focus, can be understood as dedicated to a single, dominant project, namely the liberal struggle against twentieth-century totalitarianism, in particular in its Communist form. Berlin is explicitly a partisan of liberal democracy in the Cold War. His contribution to that cause is to trace the origins of the totalitarian disease to its intellectual roots, which he finds not in any wholly new outlook peculiar to the twentieth century but in conceptions of freedom and morality deeply embedded in the history of Western thought. The cure he prescribes is a tougher, more realistic version of liberalism, disabused of what he sees as the complacent expectations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and dedicated not to the creation of a cosmopolitan utopia but to the defence of the humane management of the hard choices that are inseparable from the human condition. Berlin is scarcely a one-dimensional thinker, or one whose interests are confined to a narrow range. Nevertheless, his thought is very far from being a mere series of unrelated claims and insights. His work has a discernible shape, with a distinct centre, and its development follows an intelligible trajectory.

Three themes

Within Berlin's overarching concern with the conflict between liberty and totalitarianism, three principal themes stand out in his work. These all involve contrast and conflict: between negative and positive conceptions of liberty, between the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment, and between monist and pluralist understandings of morality.

First, Berlin finds the origins of totalitarian thinking most immediately in what he calls 'the betrayal of freedom'. This is the idea not of a simple rejection of liberty but of a systematic distortion of what freedom truly is. Negative liberty, the absence of coercive

interference, is contrasted with positive liberty, the freedom of self-mastery, where a person is ruled not by arbitrary desires but by the 'true' or authentic self. While both negative and positive ideas represent genuine and important aspects of liberty, history shows that the positive idea of freedom is peculiarly vulnerable to abuse. That is because it leaves open the possibility that the person's authentic wishes may be identified with the commands of some external authority, for example, the state or the Party. Freedom is then defined as obedience, and in effect is twisted into the very opposite of freedom. Berlin does not reject positive liberty entirely, but he warns against its potential for distortion. He recommends negative liberty, which he sees as the characteristically liberal conception of freedom, as the safer option.

The second of Berlin's major themes is the conflict between the Enlightenment on one side and the 'Counter-Enlightenment' and romanticism on the other. Berlin originally distinguished negative and positive liberty as 'liberal' and 'Romantic' conceptions of liberty respectively.² One source of the positive conception, with its emphasis on personal authenticity, is the romantic stress on the uniqueness of individuals, and of whole cultures, in reaction to the universalism of the Enlightenment. Romanticism is the cradle of modern nationalism, and of the irrationalism with which it combined in the right-wing totalitarianisms of Berlin's time. However, the Enlightenment too, on Berlin's view, is not without its share of blame for the ills of the twentieth century. As a liberal, Berlin considers himself a defender of the Enlightenment, with its faith in reason, personal liberty and toleration. But certain strains of Enlightenment thought take the claims of reason and science to utopian extremes, and these play a significant part in the genesis of the totalitarianism of the left, which is Berlin's principal target. For Berlin, Stalinism can be traced back to Marx, and from him to the hyper-optimistic scientism of well-meaning eighteenth-century *philosophes* like Helvétius, Holbach and Condorcet. The scientific strain in the Enlightenment is, moreover, usefully opposed by the Counter-Enlightenment predecessors of the romantics. Vico, Herder and Hamann, in particular, raise important questions about the adequacy of the objective methods of the natural sciences for understanding distinctively human conduct. Consequently, Berlin looks to the Counter-Enlightenment not only for the origins of fascism but also for inspiration in the fight against communism. The totalitarian disaster has roots in both the Enlightenment and its critics, but each also provides weapons against the excesses of the other.

Berlin's third theme, the opposition between monist and pluralist conceptions of morality, is his deepest. The scientific, utopian side of the Enlightenment is really a modern instance of a more deep-seated tendency in Western thought as a whole. This is to suppose that somehow, at some level, all genuine moral values must fit together in a single coherent system capable of yielding a single correct answer to any moral problem. This is moral 'monism'. Its political implication is utopian: that the true moral system, once known, will enable us to iron out all political conflicts and make possible a perfected society in which there will be universal agreement on a single way of life. Such a view, Berlin protests, does not do justice to the depth and persistence of conflict in the moral experience of human beings. That experience teaches that we are frequently faced with choices among competing goods, choices to which no clear answers are forthcoming from simple monist rules. Moreover, the monist outlook is positively dangerous. To suppose that moral and political perfection is possible, even in principle, is to invite the thought that its realization justifies the employment of any efficient means. There is a distinct, historically detectable association, Berlin believes, between moral monism and political totalitarianism by way of utopianism.

The truer and safer view of the deep nature of morality is that of 'value pluralism'. There are many human goods, we can know objectively what these are, and some of them are universal. But they are sometimes 'incommensurable', meaning that they are so different from one another that each has its own character and force, untranslatable into the terms of any other. When they come into conflict, as they often do, the choices between them will be hard choices, in part because in choosing one good we necessarily forgo another, and also because we will not be able to apply any simple rule that reduces the rival goods to a common denominator or that arranges them in a single hierarchy that applies in all cases. For example, liberty and equality are incommensurables on Berlin's view. Each is valuable for its own sake, on its own terms; no amount of one entirely compensates for any amount of the other. When they collide in particular cases, we are consequently faced with difficult, perhaps tragic, choices. Those choices cannot be resolved by a neat decision procedure such as utilitarianism, since 'utility', however understood, is simply another incommensurable good potentially in competition with liberty and equality. This does not mean that choices among incommensurables are necessarily non-rational or that no such choice can be more justified than any other, as I shall

argue later. It does mean that pluralist choices tend to be complex and often painful.

What, if anything, are the political implications of value pluralism? Berlin believes that pluralism points us towards liberalism. Pluralism in his sense implies the inescapability of choice in human experience, hence, he argues, a case for freedom of choice. Pluralism also entails, as already mentioned, the impossibility of moral and political perfection and the inevitability of disagreement and conflict. A humane and viable politics will therefore accept fundamental disagreement about the good, and seek to contain and manage that disagreement rather than transcend it. This is what liberalism does in contrast to utopian doctrines such as Marxism. Utopian thinking, made possible most fundamentally by moral monism, is an invitation to justify any means by reference to an end that is, by definition, ultimately and absolutely desirable. The value-pluralist view denies that there can be any such ultimate end, insists rather that there are many different ends to be balanced, and counsels care and moderation in seeking that balance. Pluralism thus recommends liberalism in the political field, as a humane response to human imperfection and disagreement. Berlin is a hedgehog whose single underlying message is, ironically, that of value pluralism: 'Beware hedgehogs; imitate the fox'.

Life and times

The case for liberal moderation is, for Berlin, not merely academic but the fruit of personal experience and conviction. His was a life lived close to some of the major events and personalities of the twentieth century. Berlin was born, in 1909, into a middle-class Russian-Jewish family in Riga, in what is now Latvia, then part of the Russian Empire. His father was a successful timber merchant, and the family's circumstances were comfortable. In 1916, however, the Berlins moved to Petrograd (now, as earlier, St Petersburg), and there, the following year, they witnessed at first hand the revolutions of February and October. Isaiah was seven when he saw a Tsarist policeman, 'pale and struggling', being dragged away by a crowd, apparently to his death (*Conv.*, 4). This image stayed with Berlin for the rest of his life, crystallizing his abiding fear of revolutionary violence and of political extremism in general.

With the Bolshevik regime taking root, the family left Russia, eventually settling in England in 1921. Berlin was educated at St

Paul's School in London, before winning a scholarship to Oxford, which he entered in 1928. Oxford remained his home for the rest of his life, with the exception of the War years. He began by reading Classics, but the philosophy component of the curriculum soon came to preoccupy him, and he joined a lively circle of young philosophers attracted to the logical positivism championed by A. J. Ayer. Berlin was initially drawn to the no-nonsense empiricism of the logical positivists, but became frustrated by their abstract and ahistorical approach to philosophy. His move away from this kind of thought was accelerated when, soon after his election as a Fellow of All Souls (he was the college's first Jewish member), Berlin accepted a commission in 1933 to write a brief study of Marx for the Home University Library. His research for the book introduced him not only to the writings of Marx but also to those of the eighteenth-century French *philosophes* who formed part of Marx's intellectual background. As Berlin's reading progressed he became increasingly alienated from the dry rigours of 'Oxford philosophy', and increasingly attracted to the historically and socially richer fields of the history of ideas and political theory.

During the Second World War Berlin served as a British official, working at first for the Ministry of Information in New York, and then for the Foreign Office in Washington. His principal task was to write weekly reports on American public opinion, initially as part of the effort to encourage the Americans to enter the War on the side of Britain. Berlin's reports gained him a reputation as an astute and lively political observer, and his experiences close to the corridors of power helped him to grow in maturity and confidence. In 1945 he was briefly transferred from Washington to the Soviet Union (he had remained fluent in Russian), where he came into contact with dissident Russian writers, most notably Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova. These meetings sharpened his sense both of the fate of the individual under Soviet communism and of the Russian element of his own identity.

After the War Berlin returned to teaching philosophy at Oxford, but he soon acquired a more public profile as a leading commentator on the intellectual dimensions of the developing Cold War. Throughout the early 1950s, he produced a steady stream of essays, lectures and radio broadcasts that brought out his central theme of the modern betrayal of freedom. These culminated in his appointment, in 1957, as Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford, a post he held until 1966. His inaugural lecture in 1958 was the famous 'Two Concepts of Liberty', which remains his most

influential piece, and must be one of the most frequently cited works of twentieth-century political philosophy. In the latter part of his active career, Berlin was founding President of Wolfson College, Oxford, a new college for graduate students, from 1966 to 1975. He was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1957, and President from 1974 to 1978. By the time he retired, he had become one of Britain's most prominent public intellectuals and a figure of international significance. He had known many of the most famous people of his time, among them world leaders such as Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy and Chaim Weizmann (the first president of Israel). Among the many honours he received were a knighthood (1957), the Order of Merit (1971), the Jerusalem Prize (1979), the Erasmus Prize (1983), and the Agnelli International Prize for Ethics (1988).

For and against Berlin

By the standards of institutional and popular acclaim there can be no doubt that Berlin was one of the major intellectual figures of his century. When he died in 1997 a flood of obituaries appeared, many in popular publications that would seldom acknowledge the passing of a political philosopher. Moreover, the content and tone of the great majority of these testified to the very high regard, indeed affection, in which Berlin was widely held. In the *Guardian Weekly*, for example, Bernard Crick described Berlin as 'the most famous English academic intellectual of the post-war era, outstanding lecturer, peerless conversationalist and superlative essayist'.³ On the other side of the Atlantic *Time Magazine* declared that Berlin's death had brought to a close 'one of the most illustrious intellectual adventures of this century'.⁴ The political theorist Alan Ryan noted of Berlin's passing that 'an astonishing number of people felt it as a personal loss'.⁵ Berlin was eulogized not only for his remarkable range of knowledge but also for his ability to understand and explain ideas 'from the inside', as if he shared the mental world of their proponents. 'Beyond almost any of his contemporaries', Robert Wokler wrote, 'Berlin rendered the ideas and personalities of both past and present figures vivid and compelling, because in his fashion he came close to entering their own minds and conveying their thoughts.'⁶ He was able to achieve these feats of empathetic understanding even – perhaps especially – with those views most alien and repugnant to his own, such as the

arguments of Counter-Enlightenment figures like Hamann and Maistre.

The widely admired vividness and colour of Berlin's work was made possible not only by an immense body of learning, but also by a general approach to ideas that was highly distinctive. Anglo-American philosophers and political theorists tend on the whole to employ a coolly impersonal technique, focusing on the analysis of language and the close examination of abstract chains of argument. Berlin was capable of operating in this way, as he showed in his work on logical positivism early in his career. But his more natural and characteristic idiom emphasizes synthesis rather than analysis, and his work typically depicts in bold, sweeping strokes broad commonalities and distinctions among many thinkers and outlooks. He was drawn to the deeper currents underlying the surface multiplicity of human thought, and to the general spirit animating a particular culture or historical period. Perhaps above all he was fascinated by the interplay between a thinker's thought and personality, drawing out, for example, the link between Marx's system and his authoritarian character, and between Turgenev's personal ambivalence and the inner conflicts of the heroes in his novels. His talent for entering into the personality of his subjects and seeing with their eyes has already been mentioned.

Berlin's personal and free-flowing approach to thought is reflected in his literary and personal style. His writing is full of long, mellifluous sentences, bristling with sub-clauses, qualifications and asides, which sweep the reader along with the writer's rapid sequence of thoughts. That could hardly be otherwise, since much of Berlin's work was dictated, and he was a famous talker. T. S. Eliot commended Berlin's 'torrential eloquence', as irrepressible in formal lectures and radio broadcasts as on the social circuit, and Michael Oakeshott once introduced him as 'the Paganini of the lecture platform' (*FIB*, X). Ignatieff writes that 'Those who heard him lecture [at Oxford] never forgot the experience . . . Listening was like an "airborne adventure", in which Berlin took the audience on a swooping flight over the intellectual landscapes of the past, leaving them at the end of the hour to file out onto the High Street "slightly dazed", their feet not quite touching the ground' (*Life*, 225).

Yet Berlin also has his detractors. His distinctive method of inquiry, for example, does not please everyone. Analytical philosophers sometimes regard his interest in historical personalities and epochs as evading hard questions of truth and justification; intellectual historians have complained that his focus on broad patterns

of ideas obscures or neglects too many important historical details. But Berlin did not appear to be fazed by such criticisms. Inconsistency and neglect of detail seemed to be a price he was willing to pay in order to convey what he thought most important about ideas: namely, their powerful presence in, and influence over, actual human lives. Whatever the precise balance of strengths and weaknesses in Berlin's approach (I shall return to this in chapter 8), his defenders could refer the critics to those thousands of readers, including many non-specialists, whose interest in political thought and the history of ideas he captured and stimulated.

There are political detractors too. On the left, Berlin has been seen as a one-dimensional Cold Warrior in the service of the United States, an apologist for the Vietnam War, a complacent supporter of the capitalist *status quo*, a diner at high tables who was less concerned with speaking truth to power than with ingratiating himself with the powerful.⁷ On the right, he has been condemned as a moral relativist, unable or unwilling to use his position as a prominent public intellectual to stand up against the erosion of civilized standards, in society and in the academy, that began in the 1960s.⁸ From both left *and* right he has been criticized for his silence on the fraught subject of Israel and Palestine: from the left, for his refusal, until the end of his life, publicly to condemn the more aggressive forms of Zionism and to support the claims to self-determination of the Palestinians; from the right, for his failure to extend to those same Zionist policies his whole-hearted support.⁹

Behind many of these complaints lies the more personal allegation that Berlin did not use his public authority to stand up for the principles he supposedly professed. The charge of moral cowardice was one he felt keenly, and there seem to have been occasions when he recognized in it an element of truth (*Life*, 188, 193, 293). Perhaps his perceived failings in this regard had their source in the desire of the Jewish outsider to be accepted by an insular British establishment; the psychology of the Jewish struggle for acceptance is a subject perceptively discussed by Berlin himself.¹⁰ It may be that he tried too hard to please, and that the same talents that made him such good company sometimes robbed him of the courage of his convictions. But perhaps, too, the critics were disappointed in Berlin because they did not always understand what his views really were, or because they were trying to hijack him for purposes of their own. Ignatieff rightly points out that the general content and character of Berlin's published work hardly fits the portrait 'of a man eager to please at any cost' (*Life*, 257). Berlin was unyielding in his defence

of negative liberty, of value pluralism, and of liberalism more generally, at a time when so many Western academics and students were attracted enthusiastically to the ideas of the anti-liberal left. Moreover, his embracing of the history of ideas, and the synthesizing style in which he wrote on that subject, went very much against the tide of philosophical fashion in the Oxford of his day. Nevertheless, Berlin was himself troubled throughout his life by the thought that he had been over-estimated, worrying that his work lacked coherence, direction and originality: 'I am an intellectual taxi; people flag me down and give me destinations and off I go' (*Life*, 7). Much of this self-deprecation may have been, as Ignatieff suggests, a defence mechanism, the pre-empting of genuinely hostile critics; but it seems, too, that Berlin suffered from genuine self-doubt.

Here ends the psychological speculation. My concern is with Berlin as a thinker, and my focus will be on the evidence of his published writings. Here, too, there are hard questions to be asked. Berlin never produced a book-length statement of his position to compare, for example, with John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. Ignatieff reports that he tried in his later years to marshal his thoughts on romanticism in this way, but found the task beyond him (*Life*, 275–6). Berlin's preferred form was the essay, and his most widely read book is a collection of four of these: *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969), now incorporated into the expanded *Liberty* (2002). Many of these pieces are among the most stimulating one can read in political theory or the history of ideas. But Berlin's failure to publish a more extended development of his views has been taken by some as evidence 'that he was incapable of a work of grand synthesis' (*Life*, 276), or even of sustained systematic thought. Further questions have been raised, as I shall show, about the merits of Berlin's account of liberty, the accuracy of his history of ideas, and the validity of his whole empathetic approach to political ideas.

More fundamental still is the question of how Berlin's liberalism relates to his pluralism. I believe there is a major tension between these ideas, as Berlin presents them, that places a question-mark over his entire enterprise. On the one hand, he steps forward as a defender of liberalism against the threat of totalitarianism, adopting a position in which liberal values are apparently advocated as universal, the essential preconditions for a decent human life. On the other hand, Berlin's pluralism seems sometimes to shade into relativism, to imply that between one set of fundamental values and another no single choice can be shown to be better founded than

another. In the face of pluralism, why should liberal values be ranked ahead of others, even those of totalitarians? Is it not true that one can be a liberal universalist or a value pluralist, but not both?

I shall argue that Berlin never provides a wholly satisfactory answer to this central problem, but also that he does leave us the necessary materials with which to construct such an answer. It is true that the tension between liberalism and pluralism is a problem he not only fails adequately to confront but scarcely acknowledges. In this regard his later work represents little real advance on his earlier work. In essay after essay he repeats, in his learned and elegant periods, his faith in both liberalism and pluralism, but so far as he does address the relation between them, his arguments are either flawed or crucially limited in scope. At various times he asserts that a commitment to liberalism is compatible with an acceptance of pluralism, or even that a case for liberalism is entailed by pluralism, but he offers no concerted or convincing defence of either claim. Worse still, some of Berlin's formulations of pluralism and its ethical implications have opened the way to expressly anti-liberal interpretations of the idea, such as that championed by John Gray (see chapter 7). Nevertheless, I shall also argue that, in what he does say, he provides us with the tools needed to make a substantial pluralist case for liberalism that is in keeping with his overall outlook. Scattered throughout his writings are clues to the development of a more coherent and persuasive defence of liberalism on pluralist grounds than the one he actually offers.

Unusually among philosophers, Berlin's significance rests not so much on his powers of argument as on his capacity for vivid exposition and fruitful suggestion. More specifically, we should look to Berlin for his express formulation of the idea of value pluralism, his deepening of that idea through his historical researches, his opening up of the question of pluralism's moral and political implications, his subsequent challenge to liberals to rethink liberalism in pluralist terms, and finally his scattered hints about how to do this. It is in these achievements that Berlin's deepest originality and significance as a political thinker consists.

Overview

The organization of this book is both thematic and loosely chronological. I discuss Berlin's earlier work, up to the mid-1950s, in chapter 2, connecting the emerging themes of his philosophical

outlook with the three principal strands of his complex personal identity: English, Russian and Jewish. In the 1950s Berlin explored the idea of freedom in post-Enlightenment thought and its fate in the twentieth century. This is the subject of chapter 3, which situates Berlin's treatment of freedom in the context of the Cold War, and goes on to examine his essays on free will and determinism in history, and on the 'enemies of human freedom' in modern political thought. Chapter 4 focuses on Berlin's seminal 'Two Concepts of Liberty', analysing its argument and evaluating some of the main lines of criticism to which it has been subjected. In chapter 5 I trace Berlin's deepening investigation, from the 1950s to the 1970s, of the debate between the Enlightenment and its critics and of the broader implications of that debate for modern intellectual history and political thought. Chapter 6 tackles the key distinction between moral monism and pluralism, and opens up the tension between Berlin's commitment to pluralism and his liberalism. This central issue is pursued in chapter 7, where I consider some of the competing interpretations and extensions of Berlin's position on the pluralism-liberalism nexus. In chapter 8 I locate Berlin within the modern liberal tradition, examine the implications of his ideas for social justice and cultural rights, and assess his overall achievement.