FOREWORD

Noel Annan

ISAIAH BERLIN began his academic career as a philosopher at Oxford and became famous as a historian of ideas. Oxford philosophy is important to him. It rooted him in the English linguistic analytical tradition that descends from Hume, Mill and Russell. That is why when he wrote his account of the two concepts of liberty he was so wary of what is often called 'positive freedom'. When he wrote (in 1958) it was fashionable to expose the fallacies in Mill's *On Liberty* and praise the conception of freedom that T. H. Green, influenced by Hegel and other Continental philosophers, had popularised. Green had argued that when the State interfered and passed laws forbidding pollution or controlling factory machinery, in order to safeguard workers' lives, the State was not curtailing freedom. Yes, a few men might consider that their freedom had been curtailed, but vastly more people would now be free to do things that hitherto they had been unable to do. The sum of freedom would be increased. 'Freedom for an Oxford don', it was said, 'is a very different thing from freedom for an Egyptian peasant.'[1] To accept positive freedom became the hallmark of the intelligent social democrat.

Berlin denounced this proposition as claptrap. If positive freedom is a valid ideal, then what defence is there against the Marxist claim that the State has the right to inflict terrible punishments upon those who oppose its power to compel individuals to act against what they want to do, on the grounds that they should be contributing to the welfare of the mass of the population? For Berlin the classic English interpretation of liberty is correct. It means not being coerced, not being imprisoned or terrorised. Yes, the Egyptian peasant needs food and medicine, 'but the minimum

[1] p. 196 below.

freedom that he needs today, and the greater degree of freedom that he may need tomorrow, is not some species of freedom peculiar to him, but identical with that of professors, artists and millionaires'.[1] It may well be necessary to sacrifice freedom to prevent misery. But it *is* a sacrifice; and to declare that I am really more free is a perversion of words. It may be that society is more just or prosperous and all sorts of poor people are now able to enjoy holidays abroad or have a decent home. They were free before to enjoy these things but they did not have the money. It is a perversion of language to say that now for the first time they are free.

Perversion of language is not a philosopher's fad. It matters. It matters if we say we are more free when new laws are passed to compel us to wear seat-belts in cars. We may be safer and the law may be admirable, but we are less free. Suppose we follow Rousseau and argue that no one in his right mind would wish to be a slave of ignoble passions. Suppose I am an alcoholic, a slave to the bottle. Would I not welcome being freed from that slavery? Surely my enlightened self would wish to renounce that part of my liberty that enslaves me to the bottle. Few of us are saints. Saints declare, 'In thy service is perfect freedom', renounce worldly vices, and live according to a spiritual rule. But what are we to do with the majority of mankind who are unable to master their sinful passions? Here, says Berlin, the real horror of a purely rational view of life unfolds. For if it can be shown that there is only one correct view of life, people who fail to follow it must be forced to do so. Positive freedom is the road to serfdom.

But there is yet another way of denying that human beings are free agents. Are they not the playthings of fate, caught inescapably by the impersonal forces of history? Historical processes are inevitable and, although statesmen pretend that they have the power to control events, human beings are powerless to do so. Climate, demography, the vagaries of the economy, class structures and political forces overwhelm them. It is the mission of the historian, so this line of reasoning continues, to unmask these impersonal forces. History is not an art, it is a science, 'no more, no less' as the Cambridge historian J. B. Bury said. One of Berlin's longest and most dense articles is deployed against this contention, and in his joust against E. H. Carr, the apologist for Stalin's regime,

[1] p. 197 below.

he was judged to have unhorsed his opponent. To believe in determinism would entail a shattering loss in the concepts with which we discuss morality – praise, blame, regret, forgiveness for instance.

Rooted though Berlin was in the English tradition of philosophy he rejected much that was fashionable among his contemporaries. He thought logical positivism no less disastrous than determinism. The natural sciences were not the paradigm of knowledge. Too much of what we know and value in life is excluded by this way of categorising thought. For what is remarkable about the body of his work is that it recognises how valuable, how challenging, how original were the contributions of the German philosophers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These were the men who were revolting against the soulless, mechanical ideas of the French Enlightenment. Berlin begged his contemporaries to stop regarding them and their analogues in Russia or Italy – Vico, Herder, Hamann, Herzen and Moses Hess – as benighted romantics.

He has praised them for recognising the passion men and women feel for their homeland, their own specific culture, for their nation or for their community – say, a mining village. These were what gave them their sense of identity. Marx ignored this. Berlin knows how Jews in Eastern Europe felt alienated from the society in which they lived; and from this understanding he perceives how Germans in the eighteenth century felt alienated from a Europe dominated by French culture and sophistication – just as in our times Third World countries are alienated by the Western sense of superiority.

Berlin therefore disagreed with the most powerful voices in philosophy because he did something not all that common among philosophers immediately before and after the War. He read the works of philosophers long dead, indeed of some who would not in Oxford have been called philosophers. He did not convict them of error and contrast them with the truth as we know it today. Nor did he divide them into those who point the way to saner times and those whom tyrants have used to justify their cruelty. What he did was to evoke their vision of life and contrast it with other visions of life. That is not all. He denies that there is any way of proving that one vision is more valid or more justifiable than any other. One might find Joseph de Maistre's analysis of society hateful, but we would be wrong not to realise that it contains some terrible truths, however liberals might shudder at the conclusions Maistre

drew from them. Consider Nietzsche. In his works are conclusions which the Nazis tried to translate into political action. But we would be amputating part of our sensibility if we failed to receive Nietzsche's astonishing understanding of a world no longer willing to accept the sanctions of religion as valid. Or consider Carlyle. Set beside his contemporaries, Marx and Tolstoy, he cuts a very poor figure. But he was nearer the truth than Marx and Tolstoy in reminding us that nations and societies need leaders. We do not have to agree with Carlyle when he praises Frederick the Great and Cromwell for the harshness and inhumanity of their decisions. Marx and Tolstoy were wrong to declare that statesmen are so insignificant that they do not influence events. Churchill, Roosevelt and Ben-Gurion had a crucial influence upon the destiny of their countries.

This way of looking at philosophy sustains Berlin's belief in pluralism. 'Pluralism' is a dingy word. Most people accept that there are many groups and interests in society, and a good society arranges for them to tolerate each other's existence: indeed the most powerful of all institutions in society, the State, should make a special effort to give minority interests as much scope as possible. Most people think pluralism is a pragmatic compromise. It does not compel us to abandon our belief in socialism or in the beneficence of the inequality produced by the market economy, or our belief that there is a rule, could we but act upon it, that should govern all our lives. But Berlin means something much more disturbing. He takes the unfashionable view that good ends conflict. Equality and freedom frequently conflict; and to get more of one you have to surrender some part of the other. No one can doubt Berlin's belief in the importance of liberty. But he does not beat a drum-roll for Hayek. Liberty is only one of the good things in life for which he cares. For him equality is also a sacred value, and those who reject equality as a bad dream are unsympathetic to him. He acknowledges that if liberty for the powerful and intelligent means the exploitation of the weak and less gifted, the liberty of the powerful and intelligent should be curtailed. To publish a book in England, however offensive to Moslems, is one thing. But to sell the same book in the old city in Jerusalem with maximum publicity and invite riots and death is another. The need to make distinctions of this kind is the justification of pluralism.

Or consider the plight of Antigone. Sophocles thought she was right to put respect for the corpses of her beloved brothers before

her obligation to the law. ('My nature is to love not to hate.')[1] Sartre took the opposite view. Or consider spontaneity. It is a virtue: but we should not expect to find it uppermost in the abilities of the Cabinet Secretary. Indeed one could argue that spontaneity is the last quality one wants such a high bureaucrat to exhibit. Values collide and often cannot be made to run in parallel. And not only values. Propositions too. Truth is not a unity.

It was on this matter that Berlin dissented from the English analytic philosophers. The summit of his ambition as a young man had been to get the group that centred upon Austin and Ayer to accept some point he had made as original or important. To have done that would have been to establish something that was true. True, because the circle's discussions – though most of the points made were minute distinctions in logic or perception – were sustained by a great unspoken assumption. The assumption was that all solutions to all major problems can be found if we try hard enough. Philosophers accepted as axiomatic that there could be only one true answer to a question: other answers were errors. Furthermore, all true answers must be compatible with other true answers. Truth is a unity. The good life must conform to these truths which philosophers discovered: otherwise it would not be good. In the end either we or our successors will discover these truths. And when we do we shall be able to reorganise society on rational lines free from superstition, dogma and oppression. Berlin disagreed; and he praised Machiavelli for being the first major thinker to deny that this was so. A politician cannot operate according to the strict morality of personal life.

Is Berlin a relativist? Is he saying that there is no disputing about tastes, or that we can never understand another culture because we cannot get inside it? Certainly not. However different we are from Polynesian islanders or ancient Athenians, the very fact that we can imagine what it would be like to be one means that comparisons between cultures are possible. Our ability to recognise virtually universal values informs every discussion we have about the nature of man, about sanity, about reason. Is he then an anti-rationalist? Impossible for one of his training at Oxford. He is opposed to Oakeshott because he believes reason can be applied to numbers of social problems and produce results. Reason may diminish the bruising conflicts between good ends. Peaceful trade-offs are

[1] Sophocles, *Antigone*, line 523.

possible, nor are they always fudges. Reason is needed to sort out the conflicting claims of justice, mercy, privation and personal freedom. It is true that every solution creates a new problem, new needs and demands. If children have got greater freedom because their parents fought for it, the children may make such importunate demands for a juster society that they threaten the very freedom their parents fought for. The ideas that liberated one generation become the shackles of the next. In saying this Berlin was reminding us that philosophers alone cannot explain the nature of being: the historian too can enlighten us. The history of ideas is the gateway to self-knowledge. We need it to remind us that people are not an undifferentiated mass to be organised as efficiently as possible. Efficiency and organisation should not be regarded as the ultimate goals in life. They are means, limited means, to enable men and women to live better and happier lives.

No one has ever made ideas come alive more than Isaiah Berlin. This is not strange, because he personifies them. They live because they are the progeny of human beings, and Berlin is a connoisseur of individual men and women. Nothing pleases him more than to praise famous men, such as Churchill or Roosevelt, because they enhance life and show that the impersonal forces of history, or the so-called laws that govern society, can be defied. Men and women of genius change the world. Even obscure scholars, who certainly will not change the world, can add something to the total sum of comedy, idiosyncrasy, perhaps of tragedy, when their special oddity is revealed. Berlin wants us to understand the immense variety of emotions and ideals in the world we inhabit.

That is why, Berlin insists, it is foolish to expect men and women, still more their ideas, to conform to one set of principles. He likes to play games to bring this home to us. In one of his best-known essays, on Tolstoy, he divides thinkers into hedgehogs and foxes – the hedgehogs who 'know one big thing', like Dostoevsky or Aquinas, and the foxes who 'know many things', like Turgenev or Hume – Tolstoy being a natural fox who tried to become a hedgehog. Then again he divides statesmen into those of single principle who try to bend events to their will, like Hitler, Trotsky and de Gaulle, and those who sense how events are moving and how their fellow citizens feel, and find the way to give effect to those feelings, like Lincoln, Bismarck, Lloyd George and Roosevelt. He revels in the difference between human beings. He admires austere remote scholars, but also enjoys ebullient, effervescent

scholars who prefer vehemence to reticence, pleasure to authority, who deflate the self-important and the pompous. High spirits have their place in a university as well as *gravitas*. He is not blind to human failings and he dislikes those who are inhuman and insensitive. Indeed some who battle for power and position are evil and sinister. Like Hamlet he stands amazed at 'What a piece of work is a man'; unlike Hamlet he delights in man.

Berlin, then, is hostile to the pretensions of technocrats and revolutionaries. The technocrats driving through their plans against opposition, sublime in their indifference to the ignorant opposition of those for whom they are certain a better future exists, appal him by their lack of humility. The revolutionaries, oblivious to suffering, equally appal him. Sometimes it may be necessary to go to war, assassinate a tyrant, overthrow law and order. But there is an even chance that no improvement will result. One of his favourite quotations, which he uses time and again, is from Kant: 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.'[1] He recognises that the young may pass him by. The young so often want to fight and suffer to create a nobler society. But, even when set against the most dedicated and pure socialists of my generation, he seems to me to have written the truest and the most moving of all the interpretations of life that my own generation made.

See pp. 16, 241, 603, 642 below.