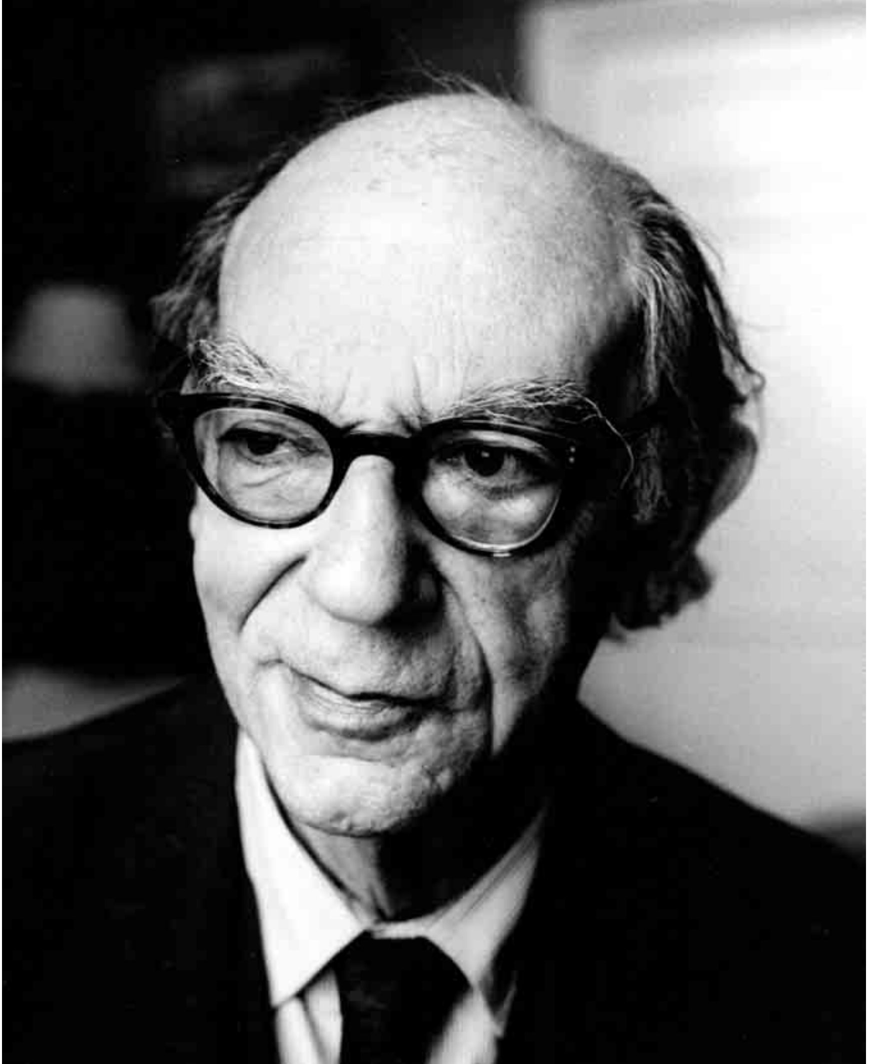

ISAIAH BERLIN

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Isaiah Berlin
1909–1997

ISAIAH BERLIN had such a varied career that his biographer should be a committee, and what follows should be a book. He had such a talent for friendship that his biographer should be above all a committee of his friends. Berlin's death inspired some remarkable tributes from those friends, among them Lord Annan's address at the Memorial Service held at the Hampstead Synagogue in January 1998 and those of Sir Stuart Hampshire and Sir Bernard Williams at the Sheldonian Theatre some two months later. Their affectionate eloquence was matched by the eloquence of Isaac Stern's violin and Alfred Brendel's piano. Almost any account of Berlin's achievements must come lamely in the wake of such tributes. Berlin's own talents as an obituarist and memorialist were, of course, extraordinary; he was a master of the *éloge*, and more than one reader thought that the collection printed in *Personal Impressions* was the best of his writing. His friends often wondered what he would say about them when the time came, or indeed what he had already written about them for future readers of *The Times* It is to be regretted that unlike Bertrand Russell, Berlin did not pen his own obituary, not even one written tongue in cheek as Russell's was.

Berlin's fascinating early life was well described in Michael Ignatieff's biography, and only a reminder is needed here. He was born in Riga, Latvia on 6 June 1909. He was an only child; a sister had been still-born, and his mother, Marie, had been warned against another pregnancy. Berlin's left arm was permanently damaged by the forceps of the attending doctor. Whether he might otherwise have had athletic tastes is doubtful, but his

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favoured place was certainly the sofa, not the mountain track. His family were upper middle-class Jews; his father was a descendant of the founder of the Lubavitcher sect, but the immediate family were thoroughly Europeanised, and their passions were musical and literary. Berlin took a wry pleasure in the fact that Menachem Schneerson, the 'Lubavitcher Rebbe', was a distant cousin. The Lubavitcher Rebbe's view of the connection is not known.

The family's comfortable life was disturbed by the First World War, which provoked anti-Germanism and anti-Semitism; the family moved to Petrograd in 1916, and there encountered the Russian Revolutions of February and October 1917. Although they suffered no violence, and not much deprivation, Berlin's parents saw what might happen after the Civil War of 1920–1, and made their way to England early in 1921. Mendel Berlin, Berlin's father, was a timber merchant with commercial ties to Britain, and greatly admired British decency and toleration. Ian Buruma has described Isaiah Berlin's acquisition of a wholly English *persona* as an astonishing act of self-creation. This perhaps underestimates Mendel Berlin's role in the process. Appropriately, the family first settled in Surbiton before they moved to Kensington.

Arriving with little English in a wholly strange environment, the 12-year-old Berlin thrived. A suburban preparatory school was followed by St Paul's, where he followed the traditional classical syllabus. In 1928 Berlin went on as scholar to Corpus Christi College, Oxford. He by-passed Honour Moderations and took a First in Greats in 1931 and another in PPE in 1932. He made many friends, and his flair for conversation was a great resource in so doing. Late 1920s Oxford was snobbish and mildly anti-Semitic, but it sheltered a society that was less attached to its social prejudices than to cleverness and charm. Both of these the young Berlin had in abundance. In 1932, he was elected to a Prize Fellowship at All Souls, the first Jew to be elected in its five-hundred-year history, an achievement that brought congratulations from the Chief Rabbi and lunch with Lord Rothschild.

Until 1938, Berlin held his All Souls Fellowship in combination with a lecturership in philosophy at New College; after the Prize Fellowship had expired, he was from 1938 to 1950 a Fellow in philosophy at New College, though absent for six years on war service. He later said that he found pre-war New College deeply boring. It was a view shared by the Warden, H. A. L. Fisher, who described the college on his return to it in 1925 as 'one - vast - mau - so - leum'. A decided compensation was the visitors Berlin met in the Warden's Lodgings, including as they did

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Virginia Woolf—Fisher's cousin—and Elizabeth Bowen. The former wrote a maliciously funny account of their meeting, but Bowen became a good friend, with whom he carried on a vivid correspondence for many years.

As a young teacher and scholar, Berlin would have been harshly judged by the appraisal committees of the present age. He always said that he could not have been a member of any academic community more tightly structured than the Oxford of his day; the ability to pursue his own interests in his own way was indispensable. He was endlessly courted by American universities after the Second World War, but he could not have survived the departmental organisation of American university life, let alone the early-morning classes common in the United States. He was reluctant to leave his bed before mid-morning, and passed the time during tutorials playing with mechanical toys or with the wind-up gramophone whose enormous horn was remembered by generations of pupils. In spite of this seeming uninterest in their work, almost all his pupils, and by no means only the cleverest, found that they learned more philosophy from Berlin than from their more orthodox instructors.

He was recalled with particular affection by students who had been terrified by, or entirely uninterested in, philosophy. The contrast with H. W. B. Joseph was much in his favour. New College students were terrified of Joseph: Maurice Bowra used to say that he had found artillery bombardments in the First World War much less frightening than the tutorials that put him off philosophy for life. The undergraduates of the 1930s were the first of many generations who found Berlin an astonishingly kindly and generous teacher. He was a rarity among university teachers in the later twentieth century in finding young people irresistible; well into his eighties, he was endlessly available to naive and vulnerable graduate students from all parts of the world, who would sit at his feet for an afternoon, and leave in a happy daze.

In the 1930s Berlin was part of a small group of young and iconoclastic philosophers that included John Austin, Stuart Hampshire, and A. J. Ayer. It was his good fortune that at All Souls and elsewhere, he had close friends of his own age and intellectual weight. They met in Berlin's rooms in All Souls and thrashed out their puzzles in debate. Berlin later regretted that they had been too introspective to publish their conclusions; their passion was for the excitement of the chase, and their chief desire to convince one another. Once they had settled a problem to their own satisfaction, they saw no reason to broadcast the answer. They were broadly in sympathy with what became the linguistic turn in philosophy,

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but as their later careers showed, were otherwise far from being of one mind. Ayer was an early convert to logical positivism, Austin, Hampshire and Berlin were not.

A favourite move within logical positivism was to translate propositions that were held to be epistemologically dubious for one reason and another into propositions felt to be more secure; statements about the past, about the future, about the contents of other minds, and about persisting material objects, were parsed as hypothetical propositions about verifiable facts about our own experience. Berlin wrote three original and powerful criticisms of this central tactic of logical positivism, 'Verification', 'Empirical Propositions and Hypothetical Statements', and 'Logical Translation', the first published in 1939, and the others in 1950. Berlin himself always said that these essays gave no clue to his later interests and work; indeed in the 1978 Preface to *Concepts and Categories*, he claimed that he could not bring himself to read them. This is somewhat at odds with the chronology: only one of them was written before the War, two were published in 1950, and a later paper on *Equality*, delivered as the Presidential Address to the Aristotelian Society in 1956, is an impeccably 'analytical' essay.

Bernard Williams had perhaps a better understanding of the matter than Berlin himself. It is true enough that Berlin's assaults on the implausibility of assorted forms of phenomenalism were deft statements of what became the orthodox view—that the supposedly more reliable propositions into which we were to translate statements about the past, about physical objects, and about other minds in fact presupposed the truth of statements about these allegedly dubious entities. But Berlin was more concerned with something rather different. He always thought of philosophy as a discipline concerned with uncovering the hidden presuppositions of our everyday claims about the world and ourselves. This rather Collingwoodian view of the subject implied from the first an interest in the history of ideas, the context of inquiry, and the intellectual temper of the philosopher whose ideas are being scrutinised. The passion for bringing thinkers vividly to life that Berlin's work exhibited after the Second World War was implicit in his work much earlier.

More important in the longer term was the commission from Fisher and Gilbert Murray in 1933 for an account of the life and ideas of Karl Marx for the Home University Library. Berlin was not the publisher's first choice for a project that had already been turned down by the Webbs, Frank Pakenham, and Harold Laski, and it took him a long time to finish the book. Although Berlin was a notoriously rapid talker, he was a slow producer of manuscripts. He was an inveterate tinkerer with his text

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and reluctant to hand it over to be published. Both the manuscript and the typescript of *Karl Marx* display his passion for rewriting up to, and frequently after, the last possible moment, and they induce some surprise that *Karl Marx* ever saw the light of day at all. In the event, *Karl Marx* was a publishing success and a double landmark in Berlin's life. It was one of the first works in English to treat Marx objectively—neither belittling the real intellectual power of his work, nor descending into hagiography. And it revealed Berlin's talent as a historian of ideas—or more exactly as a biographer of ideas. Berlin was no admirer of Marx, and deplored the political consequences of his ideas, but he entered into the mental world of Marx and his contemporaries as few biographers have known how to do.

It was a decidedly lop-sided book inasmuch as Berlin never took any interest in Marx's economics; when he revised the book thirty years later, it was to write more kindly of Marx's theory of alienation, not to provide a beginner's guide to the transformation of values into prices. What Berlin was interested in was the philosophical frame of mind in which intellectuals embraced utopian schemes for the regeneration of mankind. The fact that he thought of himself as almost wholly devoid of religious sensibility did not prevent him finding the utopians of the nineteenth century endlessly, but appallingly, fascinating. Like Carl Becker, whose *Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* lies behind a good many of Berlin's post-war essays on the Enlightenment and its critics, Berlin thought that many a secular rationalist had been nourishing in his bosom an essentially religious hankering after a timeless harmony—social, intellectual, and psychological. The five years of reading and reflection on the ideas and allegiances of the radical intelligentsia of nineteenth-century Europe that were needed to write *Karl Marx* furnished Berlin with the resources he employed in his later accounts of the Enlightenment, of Romanticism, and of the ideas of the Russian radicals whom he brought to wider notice in the 1940s and 1950s.

Berlin's career was first interrupted and then spectacularly accelerated by the outbreak of the Second World War. Initially, he was stranded. He was not fit for military service, and as a Latvian by birth he was suspect to the intelligence services, who vetoed his application for a humble desk job. In the summer of 1940, Guy Burgess persuaded him to accompany him to Moscow. Who had authorised the trip—if anyone—is still unclear. Later events suggested that if it was not Harold Nicolson, it was Burgess himself, and that he had not even tried to persuade his superiors to endorse the scheme. He and Berlin arrived in the United States after an

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unpleasant Atlantic crossing, and Burgess was promptly recalled to London. Berlin's efforts to get to Moscow were then vetoed by Sir Stafford Cripps, the British Ambassador. Meanwhile, Berlin began to charm the political and newspaper élites of Washington and New York to whom he was introduced by Felix Frankfurter, the Supreme Court Justice whom he had met in Oxford a few years earlier. Friends suggested to Lord Lothian that a job should be found for Berlin, and he was set to work analysing American press reports of the British war effort. This went so well that he was given a permanent post in the British Information Office in New York. After a few weeks back in Britain to settle his affairs, Berlin returned to the United States in January 1941, and spent the remainder of the war there.

After a year in New York he was poached by the British Embassy in Washington, and for the remainder of the war drafted dispatches for transmission to London for his Ambassador, Lord Halifax. (A selection was published by H. G. Nicholas in 1981 as *Washington Despatches 1941–1945.*) They were much admired by Winston Churchill and many others. The usually remote Halifax —'a creature from another planet' in Berlin's recollection—was fond of his colleague from All Souls and gave him his head. Through Frankfurter, Berlin met most of the Democratic administration, along with coming young journalists such as Joseph Alsop, and the publishers of the *Washington Post,* Philip and Katherine Graham, all of whom remained friends for life. Berlin walked with great skill the fine line between exact reporting and colouring the news to enhance the prospects of a desired policy. It was a skill that he especially needed to preserve relations with Chaim Weizmann and other Zionist friends. Berlin did what he could to keep doors to both the American and British governments open for them, but he was acutely aware of Foreign Office doubts about Zionist aspirations and the limits beyond which he could not go. He neither betrayed his friends nor destroyed his own usefulness by becoming an object of suspicion to his employers, even though in the course of 1943 he was instrumental in obstructing a joint British-American declaration against the establishment of a post-war Jewish state.

The years in Washington brought Berlin into close contact with the makers of American foreign policy and reshaped his sense of what he might do with his life. Even more important were his postwar encounters with Russian poets, novelists, dramatists and other intellectuals in the winter of 1945–6. He finally got his wish to work in Moscow, and spent six months there at the end of the war. Just what happened is hard to

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recapture, even though Berlin wrote several accounts of his experiences, but he was evidently persuaded of two things. The first was that he was as much a Russian intellectual as an Oxford don; the other was that Stalin's near-destruction of Russian cultural and intellectual life was appalling, not only because of the cruelty and thuggishness involved in all Stalin's actions, but because there had been a vitality and originality in Russian literature and political thinking from the 1840s onwards that made them more vivid and more engrossing than anything in the West. At a personal level, it was Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak who persuaded him of this; at a more austerely intellectual level, it was Alexander Herzen and Ivan Turgenev.

Berlin decided that if he was to remain in England and Oxford, it could not be as a post-war incarnation of the philosophy tutor he had been before the war. He did not immediately abandon philosophy for the history of ideas, nor did he immediately abandon undergraduate teaching. It was not until 1950 that he resigned his fellowship at New College and returned to All Souls. Indeed, he half-jokingly claimed that the move had been forced upon him when he was sacked by an economy-minded bursar of New College who had counted the philosophy tutors and decided that Berlin was one too many. But his intellectual tastes had in any case changed. He turned to the history of ideas, political theory, and what may be termed 'cultural commentary'. The change was signalled in 1953 by the publication of *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, the long essay on Tolstoy's theory of history that made famous a hitherto obscure tag from Archilochus: 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.' Tolstoy, on Berlin's view of the matter, was a fox who tried to turn himself into a hedgehog, a man whose genius lay in his understanding of the infinite variety of human character, and who drove himself almost mad by trying to cramp that genius into a single recipe for salvation.

In 1954, Berlin gave the Northcliffe Lectures on 'A Marvellous Decade' that brought to an English audience the ideas of Herzen and Belinsky and other romantic radicals of the Russian 1840s. Their impact on British intellectual sensibilities was indirect but powerful. On the one hand, the lectures demonstrated that liberalism could no longer be thought of as an Anglo-American possession presented to the world by John Locke and John Stuart Mill; on the other, they showed that the contrast between a naturally despotic Russia and a naturally liberal western Europe had to be given up. In the Soviet Union, Berlin's revelation of the romantic, liberal Herzen was heretical; in Soviet ideology, Herzen was approved of as a populist, though criticised for the inadequate, pre-Marxist

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view that underlay his populism. The loathing with which Herzen would assuredly have greeted the Soviet regime was not something Soviet commentators cared to have dwelled on.

During the 1950s Berlin became an important figure outside academic life in the broader cultural life of Britain, as a speaker on the BBC Third Programme and as a commentator on political and intellectual life in the context of the Cold War. To the surprise and occasionally the anger of critics, Berlin wrote nothing about the Holocaust, and little about German anti-Semitism as such. Nonetheless, he wrote at length and vividly about what one might call Jewishness in the modern world. After several decades in which political theorists have endlessly discussed multiculturalism in all its varieties, the dilemmas of what one might call 'Enlightenment Judaism' have become better understood; but Berlin was an important originator of the debate about where the middle ground lay between assimilation and exclusion—whether that be self-exclusion or exclusion by the wider society.

One of his more surprising insights was that the existence of the state of Israel was a necessity for Jews everywhere, but not as a place of refuge for the survivors of the Holocaust or future victims of persecution in the Middle East or the Soviet Union. He explained the importance of the existence of the state of Israel for Jews outside Israel in his essay on 'Jewish Slavery and Emancipation'. A state that Jews anywhere in the world could regard as a second home protected Jewish freedom everywhere else. Berlin himself certainly experienced the existence of Israel as an element in his conviction that he could choose to stay in England without facing a stark choice between assimilation and emigration. Although he was urged by his Zionist friends to join them in Israel, there was no real prospect of his doing so. He felt too English to make his home among Middle Eastern Jews, and in any event disliked a good many of the most significant figures in the new state, and was unhappy about the role of terrorism in its creation.

Nonetheless, he remained a confirmed liberal Zionist, and he remained a good friend of Chaim Weizmann, the first President of Israel, and the subject of one of Berlin's most heartfelt *éloges*. An interesting insight into Berlin's view of Israel is provided by an another *éloge*, this time of his cousin Yitzhak Sadeh (born Isaac Landoberg), who was a noted general in the Israeli War of Independence. Berlin recalled him as 'a huge child', who did more for Israel than his exploits on the battlefield alone might suggest. In Berlin's words, he 'introduced an element of total freedom, unquencheable gaiety, ease, charm, and a natural elegance, half

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bohemian, half aristocratic, too much of which would ruin any possibility of order, but an element of which no society should lack if it were to be free or worthy of survival'. The moral for Israeli politics was the more powerful for being unstated. In something of the same way, his famous essay on Moses Hess's slow and reluctant movement from assimilationism to a liberal Zionism provided a further perspective on Berlin's own state of mind. It would be going too far, however, to try to extract further insights from perhaps the most unlikely—but wonderful—short double-biography of all time, his essay on Karl Marx and Benjamin Disraeli as exemplars of mid-Victorian London Jewishness.

In 1953 Berlin spent some months teaching at Bryn Mawr, and there gave a set of lectures entitled *Political Ideas of the Romantic Age* which were intended to provide the basis of a series of talks for the BBC with the same title. The unfinished and ill-organised typescript of these lectures contains in embryo almost all the most important essays on topics in political theory that Berlin published over the next two decades, and in particular *Two Concepts of Liberty*. As a political theorist he was concerned with Stalinist totalitarianism rather than Nazism. His interest lay in the way in which the rationalist and reformist impulses of the Enlightenment, sometimes in perverse combination with the anti-Enlightenment forces of Romanticism, had produced millenarian and totalitarian movements that had set back the cause of liberal, pluralist, humanitarian progress by a century and more. It was this concern that gave him an undeserved reputation as an anti-Enlightenment thinker himself. He was, as he himself said, a cautious defender of Enlightenment.

It was in arguing on behalf of a pluralist, indeterminist, open-ended version of Enlightenment that he invoked those figures in the history of ideas that he particularly made his own. Berlin described himself as having abandoned philosophy in order to pursue the history of ideas. He gave two different reasons for the change of intellectual allegiance. Sometimes, he suggested that he had become bored with philosophy as practised in Oxford and Harvard. He often quoted the deflationary observation of C. I. Lewis: 'There is no a priori reason for thinking that the truth, once discovered, will necessarily prove interesting.' Berlin did not wish to spend his life accumulating boring truths. More often he said that he had come to believe that there was no progress in philosophy and that he had wanted to work in a field where he could expect to know more by the time he died than he had known when he started. This is the version of events that he recounts in the Preface to *Concepts and Categories* where he ascribes his change of course to a conversation with the

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Harvard logician H. M. Sheffer; Sheffer had said that the only areas of philosophy in which unequivocal progress could be made were logic and psychology—the latter being capable of empirical development. Whether Berlin made the transition that either of these explanations suggest is doubtful.

He certainly did not become the kind of historian of ideas that his second account implied that he should have become. He was not interested in the quotidian history that lay behind the ideas by which he was fascinated. Bold ideas and original, quirky, and imaginative thinkers interested him. When more historically minded historians of ideas observed that ideas are transmitted by the derivative and the second-rate, Berlin did not turn to the derivative and the second-rate. He occasionally rescued the intellectually second-rate from obscurity, but only because he found them interestingly underivative. It sometimes seemed to be out of a sense of historical justice that he rescued them; because they had had no impact, he wished to bring them to the attention of their descendants, to rescue them from the condescension of history.

Berlin found the politics of the 1960s and 1970s more difficult than those of the 1950s; the uninhibited defence of Anglo-American liberalism against Stalinist oppression was a good deal easier than knowing just what to say about the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, the intellectual apparatus on which he relied and the allegiances in whose service it was employed were firmly in place by the early 1950s, and what happened thereafter was more application than innovation. Before turning to Berlin's career as Chichele Professor of Political Thought, President of Wolfson College, Oxford, Fellow and President of the British Academy, and trustee of the Royal Opera House, the National Gallery, and a host of other institutions, we may profitably ask what Berlin's renowned 'pluralism' amounted to, and how it was connected to the way he practised the history of ideas. We may leave to the end of this account a last look at the kind of liberalism Berlin defended.

One might in no unkind spirit wonder why Berlin invoked the historical figures he did to draw the morals he wished to draw. If Berlin wished to argue that values are many not one, that the future is open not closed, and that the quest for Utopia is more likely to arrive at Hell than Heaven, he needed no help from the dead. These are issues in philosophy or matters of political prudence that he could have argued on his own behalf, and without appealing to anyone else for support. Many essays did indeed argue the case with less historical reference. Understood as an essay in analytical political philosophy, 'Two Concepts of Liberty' might seem

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heavily encrusted with historical allusion; but it is not an essay in the history of ideas. 'From Hope and Fear Set Free' is similarly light on historical reference, while 'Historical Inevitability' argues against determinist theories of history with relatively little further reference.

Nonetheless, all these essays rely for their effect on a historical framework and a network of historical allusion. The question is why this approach was so frutiful. The answer perhaps lies with Berlin's discovery of Giambattista Vico. Berlin was seized by Vico's concept of *fantasia*, and he took over Vico's thought that human society was a historical phenomenon, that an understanding of the human mind was to be sought by an active effort of positive, imaginative recreation, and that understanding the moral and political concepts by which we make sense of our existence, both individual and collective, is a historical activity.

This suggests yet another reason to reject a sharp separation between the philosophical and the historical understanding of the concepts of political philosophy. They are, on this view, best understood as the reflection of transitional, if not necessarily transitory, attempts by human cultures to grasp their moral and political experience and to mould it in ways they desire. The other feature of the concept of *fantasia* that provides the clue, not so much to the content as to the dazzling rhetorical form, of Berlin's work in the history of ideas is its emphasis on the *re-enacting* of past thought as it was thought by past thinkers. I have in other contexts over-used the image of Berlin taking his hearers to a party in the Elysian Fields; but the thought that conveying a full understanding of another writer is very like bringing the reader into the physical presence of that writer is, with due allowances made, hard to escape. Berlin's account of the kind of knowledge that Vico had identified was that it was the sort of knowing that participants in an activity possess as against mere observers: the knowledge of actors rather than the audience, that it was the 'inside' story rather than one obtained from some 'outside' vantage point. It was, he said, the kind of knowledge involved when a work of the imagination or of social diagnosis or a work of critcism or scholarship or history is described not as correct or incorrect, but as profound or shallow, realistic or unrealistic, perceptive or stupid, alive or dead.

Thinking our way through the dichotomies of 'pluralism/monism,' 'freedom/authoritarianism,' and 'indeterminism/determinism' is on that view part of a conversation with writers, many of whom happen to be dead, and it is an activity that requires us to imagine our own society pictured against others, in order to illuminate its virtues and vices. To know why we believe in—if we do believe in—negative liberty, for

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instance, is to know what we would want to say to Pericles about his beloved Athens, and what we would want to say to Benjamin Constant about the contrast he drew between the liberty of the ancients and the liberty of the moderns. Seen in that light, Berlin's handling of the figures about whom he wrote becomes easy to understand.

By the same token, the pluralism that Berlin defended was multidimensional, and one whose character emerged in the course of a dialogue with writers who were themselves sometimes pluralists and sometimes monists, and often both at once. Machiavelli's pluralism was not that of Benjamin Constant, and neither was a pluralist in the same sense as Herder. How best to characterise Berlin's own understanding of pluralism is not easy to know. It is, after all, a fairly banal thought that in the world as we have it, not everything that we want can be had simultaneously, and Berlin was certain that pluralism was not banal. For Berlin, it was a deep truth that good lives were many not one; Tolstoy's search for the one saving truth may have been misguided, but his mistake, if it was a mistake, was not silly, but tragic. By the same token, the idea that we can accommodate the tensions of multiple demands upon us by a strategy of 'mix and match' will do for lifestyle choices and will not do for anything more serious.

What Berlin wrote was still philosophy rather than history, but he almost reversed the old tag that history is philosophy teaching by examples. It was rather that philosophy is history raised to self-consciousness. Ideas come to life in a process that Berlin self-consciously understood as a re-enactment of the original author's thinking. The ideas in which Berlin was interested, particularly the central concepts of politics such as freedom, equality and progress can only be understood historically and comparatively in the light of the way they have been understood in different societies and cultures. They are also pre-eminently ideas that take their colouring from the personality of the thinkers who explore them; Berlin's talent for gossip was the everyday social counterpart of an unusual talent for exploring the psychology of his favourite thinkers.

Critics sometimes complained that Berlin projected more of himself than was proper onto the figures he most admired, but the effect was certainly to bring to life neglected thinkers as well as to illuminate well-known ones in novel ways. It also meant that his natural form of expression was the lecture and the essay rather than the monograph, which gave him an unjustifed reputation for being reluctant to publish. He published a great deal, but it was often in fugitive journals and out of the way places, as though he disliked the thought of freezing an unfinished

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conversation by committing himself in too public a fashion, and was happier to be overheard than read.

It was not only Berlin's intellectual life that prospered in the 1950s. Berlin enjoyed the company of women, but thought himself sexually unattractive, and believed until his late thirties that he was destined to remain a bachelor. All Souls was a more than comfortable setting for the bachelor life, and Berlin's affection for his mother was such that he need neither be driven into marriage by the discomforts of single life nor lured into it by the need for stronger emotional attachments than the unmarried life provided. It was to the surprise of his numerous friends that in 1956 he married Aline Halban, the daughter of Pierre de Gunzbourg. He thereby acquired step-children as well as a beautiful and well-connected wife. They established themselves in Aline's substantial and elegant house on the outskirts of Oxford: Headington House, nicknamed 'Government House' by Berlin's more left-wing friends, and there they lived and entertained—or, as the same friends had it, held court—for the next forty years. Although he left marriage late, Berlin never ceased to recommend the married condition, and his happiness was a persuasive advertisement for what he preached.

In 1957 he was elected to the Chichele Professorship of Social and Political Theory. The next twenty years were the high tide of Berlin's career. He was elected to the British Academy in the same year, was Vice-President from 1959 to 1961, and President from 1974 to 1978; he was a member of the Board of Directors of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, from 1954 to 1965, and again from 1974 to 1987, and a Trustee of the National Gallery from 1975 to 1985. He had received the CBE for his wartime service in 1946, was knighted in 1957, and awarded the Order of Merit in 1971. These positions and honours, more than enough for most people, do not capture the richness of Berlin's existence, nor his impact on British, American and Israeli social and cultural life. He was in constant demand as a lecturer; and he gave dazzling performances in settings obscure and famous. He described himself in self-deprecating terms as an intellectual taxi-cab: when he was hailed, he went. Yet, even though he was a figure who seemed more at home in the streets of Jerusalem and New York than in the English countryside, he found Oxford indispensable, and still resisted the urgings of Israeli or American friends who thought he should abandon his phlegmatic and slow-moving English university for more adrenalin-charged environments. They failed to see that Berlin was not the cosmopolitan figure they thought; his view was that most of us need a base in some particular place and attachments

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to particular persons and opinions if we are to understand other places, persons, and opinions. Perhaps he was conscious of the insult of 'rootless cosmopolitan' that was the commonplace of Soviet anti-Semitism; at all events, it was a rooted cosmopolitanism that he espoused.

Berlin's loyalty to Britain needed little theoretical explanation. He had arrived as a small boy; Britain was tolerant and friendly; and it was full of people for whom he felt affection. Although he was instantly at home in New York, or Washington, or Cambridge, Massachusetts, he had no reason to emigrate to places that he could visit as often as he liked without revising his political and personal allegiances. If it was a matter of sheer pleasure, he preferred Italy to any other destination. He and Aline built a house overlooking Portofino, and from there he explored far and wide, frequently in search of half-forgotten *bel canto* operas that were being revived in out of the way places.

In 1966, he became President of Wolfson College. Under the name of Iffley College, this had been a new and under-financed graduate college, created to provide a collegiate base for lecturers, mostly scientists, who had no collegiate attachment, and to provide a community for graduate students who had hitherto been neglected in Oxford. The Ford Foundation and the Wolfson Foundation provided an endowment for the college. It was renamed Wolfson College in acknowledgement of the generosity of Sir Isaac Wolfson's foundation. Berlin toyed with the thought that 'St Isaac's' might be apt, but only in private. With these resources, he secured from the architectural practice of Powell and Moya one of their best large-scale developments, a set of unflinchingly modern collegiate buildings running gently down to the River Cherwell, whose white concrete and granite starkness was not softened but elegantly heightened by the lushness of the gardens and riverside.

Berlin was a very successful founding president, but he had never been enthusiastic about presiding over an established collegiate institution. He was an inventor rather than a manager. Nor did he expect to feel at home in the institution he had created. Berlin wanted Wolfson College to be family-friendly; but All Souls and New College had not provided much training for a world in which married graduate students took this to mean that they should bring their babies to dinner in college. Berlin retired from Wolfson College in 1975, and returned to All Souls as a Distinguished Fellow.

He remained a considerable intellectual figure. His years at Wolfson coincided with the most contentious period of British and American post-war politics. The Vietnam War, and the upheavals of 1968 in France,

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Germany, Czechoslavakia and the United States, raised questions about the prospects of liberal politics. Berlin's inaugural lecture as Chichele Professor, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', was second in fame only to *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, and came to occupy a position in late twentieth-century liberalism like Mill's essay *On Liberty* a hundred years earlier. Its ambiguities and unclarities have been explored for half a century, but its simple assertion of the priority of 'negative liberty'—the right to be left alone—over other goals—including those summed up as 'positive liberty'—was irresistible to most and intolerable to many. Written when admirers of the Soviet Union were still insisting that it had achieved a higher form of liberty than the decadent West, 'Two Concepts of Liberty' was seized on by the critics of Soviet Communism, and inevitably became entangled in the arguments between Cold War liberals and their liberal and socialist critics.

Berlin's liberalism remains difficult to characterise. There is a tension at its heart that Berlin never quite addressed. He famously held two views. The first was his pluralism: that the ends of human existence are many not one, they conflict with one another, and that there is no one best life, either for an individual—who must live one only of the possible lives that might suit her or him—or for whole societies—each of which holds a particular set of cultural, social, political, moral, or religious allegiances which bring with them gains and losses peculiar to them. This insistence on the plurality of goods was neither relativism nor scepticism, neither the view that what is good depends on who and where you are, nor the view that there are no real goods or bads. Berlin thought there was a plurality of genuine goods. Yet he also held a second view, that liberty took priority over all other values. On the face of it, this combination is incoherent. If there is no rationally defensible hierarchy of values, liberty cannot be at its summit. There are many ways of softening the conflict between Berlin's liberalism and his pluralism; none is so obviously right that one can assume that it must be what he really thought.

Berlin's liberalism was not in the ordinary sense political. In party terms, it was consistent with voting for any of the main parties in British politics, and implied an allegiance to none of them in particular; in fact, he held moderate Labour views in the 1940s and became more sceptical about social reform as he aged. His liberalism was the defence of a set of cultural and psychological attachments rather than the defence of a particular set of political and legal arrangements. Like the romantics that he invoked in his Mellon Lectures on *The Roots of Romanticism* in 1965, Berlin saw human beings as always unfinished creatures capable of new

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and unpredictable feats of invention. Like the romantics, he thought it was impossible to write history from the detached perspective appropriate to physics or chemistry, and that it was absurd to pretend to do so. History was not a scientific experiment but a moral drama. The main models for Berlin's literary, cultural, and philosophical engagements were Russian: Belinsky, Herzen, and Turgenev in particular. Berlin translated Turgenev's *First Love* as early as 1950, and twenty years later devoted his Romanes Lecture of 1970 to Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*.

It was an extraordinarily apt choice. By this time Berlin closely identified with Turgenev. Turgenev sympathised with the young radicals of the 1870s while thinking they were intolerably crude and fanatical; Berlin felt the same about their successors of the 1960s. Turgenev feared that his scepticism and caution in political matters might be mere cowardice; so did Berlin. Such anxieties were heightened by the political quarrels of the 1960s, when Berlin's many American friends took violently opposed sides on the Vietnam War and all expected him to side with them. Berlin had no qualms about describing himself as a 'Cold War Liberal', inasmuch as he had no doubt that the United States and what it represented were worth defending against the threat posed by the Soviet Union. His doubts about the Vietnam War were not high-principled; as a matter of prudence, he was far from certain that American foreign policy was well-advised.

Berlin's talent for friendship means that a roll-call of those who thought of themselves as his good friends would embrace most of the musical world in Europe and the United States, just as it would embrace social and political theorists, philanthropists, journalists, diplomats and politicians. Their affection for him is not surprising; their admiration for him is in some respects more so. Berlin's passion for music was unaccompanied by any technical proficiency; he could not play an instrument, and could not read a score. He was, nonetheless, a friend of Stravinsky, and later a close friend of Alfred Brendel, who said that Berlin was a uniquely illuminating commentator on his performances. He had discussed music endlessly with Theodore Adorno before the war, and his first published essays were on musical performances. He often said that he could not imagine a world without music.

As in many other areas, his intuitive sense of the most important issue at stake was uncanny. He had, like anyone else, blind spots and antipathies; he did not care for Wagner, and disliked the cruelty that lurks in *Turandot* and *Tosca* The operas of Mozart and Italian opera from Bellini to Verdi were where his affections lay, rather in the way his non-operatic passions led him to Mozart and Schubert. The powerful feelings

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that music provoked made him a very influential Trustee of the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden. His passion was above all for the music; *prima la musica* was his operating principle, though it took exceptional performances to make him forgive cheap or tawdry productions. One achievement was to secure the services of Sir Georg Solti as musical director at Covent Garden. As a Trustee of the National Gallery, he was equally invaluable. When the controversial Sainsbury Wing was being built, he played a vital role in soothing the bruised feelings of the Trustees on the one side, and of their distinguished architect, Robert Venturi, on the other. Characteristically, what enabled him to do this was his discovery that the architect's wife was a Baltic Jew like himself. And he was an impressively fearless President of the British Academy; his intellectual distinction, and his years of mingling with politicians, senior civil servants, and the rich and famous in the worlds of arts and letters, gave him a unique immunity against whatever governments and administrators might try to impose.

It is more puzzling that Berlin was admired by historians and sociologists to whom his unconcern for minute factual detail would, on the face of it, have not endeared him; but only a very few of them could bring themselves to complain that his broad-brush characterisations of movements of ideas in European history omitted much and misrepresented a good deal. The obvious explanation is that even where one might on third or fourth reading come to think Berlin's characterisation of a thinker or a thought was seriously askew, readers were grateful for the stimulus provided by Berlin's fertile imagination. He started hares, flushed the historical coverts for overlooked quarry, and discovered strange, neglected species. By the same token, his success as a college president and his membership of so many governing bodies and committees might seem slightly surprising. He was an enthusiastic conspirator, and enjoyed getting his favoured candidates into positions for which they were not always entirely suited, but he was not one of nature's civil servants.

He did not need to be, since those who were were sufficiently enchanted to carry out his plans. The same qualities kept him on good terms with the publishers who despaired of the books they had been promised, and the editors who got corrections to their proofs long after the last possible moment. This did not go along with a wholly relaxed attitude to his work. His capacity for tinkering with the wording of his text went well beyond the point of diminishing returns, and his self-deprecating estimate of his own abilities did not extend to an equal tolerance of criticism from others. He was notably thin-skinned. It must be

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said in mitigation that his critics were rarely very friendly; they were made fiercer by Berlin's own eminence and because political allegiances were as much at stake as academic reputations. Berlin died in Oxford on 5 November 1997. Although he was in his late eighties and had been ill for several months, he left a hole in many lives that the years since have not filled.

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Note. Portions of this memoir have been taken from my entry on Isaiah Berlin in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 60 vols. (Oxford, 2004), 5, 402–8 and my essay, 'Isaiah Berlin: Political Science and Liberal Culture', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2 (1999), 345–62. I am grateful to Lawrence Goldman and Nelson Polsby respectively for their kind permission.

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