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Isaiah Berlin Against the Current

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To one who thinks philosophically, no story is a matter of indifference, even if it were the natural history of the apes.

—H. M. G. Koster

It was an anecdote he liked to tell. In 1944, while working at the British Embassy in Washington, D.C., Isaiah Berlin was called back to London on short notice, and it happened that the only plane available to take him was a loud, uncomfortable military bomber. Because the cabin wasn't pressurized he had to wear an oxygen mask that kept him from speaking. And there were no lights, either, so he couldn't read. It was a long flight. He joked afterward, "one was therefore reduced to a most terrible thing—to having to think."

While airborne, the story went, he had a small epiphany. In the 1930s he had taught philosophy at Oxford, happily, with his likeminded friends Stuart Hampshire, J.L. Austin, and A.J. Ayer. Logical positivism had just come into its own in Britain and Wittgenstein was already developing ideas about language that would challenge it. Something seemed to be happening. But as the war dragged on Berlin wondered whether this style of philosophy was really for him. History had intruded into his life a second time (the first was when he witnessed the Russian Revolution as a young boy in Petrograd) and he had just spent several years in the United States writing influential reports to the British government about the American war effort.



Dominique Nabokov

Isaiah Berlin (center) with his friends Stuart Hampshire and Nicolas Nabokov, Oxford, England, 1969

What did his early writings on verification and logical translation have to do with any of this? How did they address the pressing issues of the day? He found himself more and more drawn to engaged nineteenth-century Russian writers like Ivan Turgenev and Alexander Herzen, whose questions, he was discovering, were closer to his own. Thinking all this through in the darkness of the bomber he reached the conclusion, as he later put it, “that what I really wanted was to know more at the end of my life than I knew at the beginning.” When the war was over he gave up his philosophy fellowship and started calling himself a historian of ideas.

It was a witty, self-deprecating story. I’ve often wished, though, that he hadn’t told it. Berlin’s decision baffled his friends and colleagues back at Oxford, and left the impression, reinforced by this story, that he had taken a step down the intellectual ladder. It occurred to no one at the time that moving to the history of ideas might actually represent a step up. Philosophy was philosophy, history was history, and that was that. No one in Britain called himself a historian of ideas, and no one wrote the kind of wide-ranging, labyrinthine essays connecting thinkers over many centuries that Berlin perfected. The dons could make nothing of them and considered him a dilettante. Berlin was too urbane to defend himself or engage in dull debates about methodology, and bore their contempt with the irony of a gentleman. (At least in public. In conversation and letters he gave as good as he got.)

Rereading *Against the Current*, his first collection of essays and portraits in the history of ideas, published over thirty years ago, it’s hard to understand how so many missed what is obvious on every page: that Isaiah Berlin never abandoned philosophy. The questions he addressed in the book are questions philosophers have occupied themselves with for millennia: the extent and limits of reason, the nature of language, the role of the imagination, the foundation of morality, the concept of justice, the conflicting claims of citizenship and community, the meaning of history.

But he reasoned about them in a manner adapted to his particular interests and abilities. When analytic philosophers look to past thinkers at all, they try to extract “arguments” they can express in terms they typically use. Their assumption is that philosophy can only happen once ideas sprout wings and escape the body, like the souls in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. This was not Berlin’s assumption. His instinct told him that you learn more about an idea *as an idea* when you know something about its genesis and understand why certain people found it compelling and were spurred to action by it. Then the real thinking begins.

Intellectual portraiture once had an important place in philosophy. Plato’s dialogues, when

read singly, appear to be straightforward investigations into discrete philosophical questions like “What is love?” or “Can virtue be taught?” But read together they become the portrait of Socrates, whose lesson was that philosophy is a way of life, not just a set of arguments or doctrines. The same can be said of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* or Tacitus’ *Annals* and *Histories*, which explore human psychology and morality through profiles of philosophers and statesmen and despots. Renaissance and early-modern philosophers relied heavily on these stories to illustrate their own ideas, or to mask them, as Machiavelli and his followers did with Tacitus. Montaigne leaned more on Plutarch, who also provided a model for his own venture in philosophical biography, the essay “Of Friendship,” which evokes the life and ideas of his friend Étienne de la Boétie.

Berlin did something similar in his essays. Though he wrote well-regarded profiles of exemplary figures like Machiavelli, Montesquieu, and Marx, he was much more drawn to marginal thinkers he could make exemplary and use to highlight the questions that interested him. He had a weakness for underdogs, especially if he initially found their views uncongenial. It didn’t matter if the writing was obscure or the reasoning sometimes opaque. Berlin had learned that if you studied them with philosophical intent, certain second-rate minds grappling with first-rate problems could teach you more than first-rate minds lost in the shrubbery. (Another reason, perhaps, that he abandoned analytic philosophy.)

He clearly enjoyed picking up the crumbling collected works of a half-forgotten thinker, or one considered beyond the pale, and finding high philosophical drama in them. His approach was the exact contrary of that taken by today’s intellectual historians, who seem determined to place thinkers into such narrow social contexts that the wider significance of their ideas disappears. There’s a deflationary impulse behind their work that is difficult to fathom. Berlin had no interest in taking thinkers down a peg. If anything, he could be accused of exaggerating their importance if he thought doing so helped to vivify an important philosophical problem.

Anyone who has tried writing philosophical portraits knows how easy it is to fail. It requires patience. Rather than pounce on arguments that leap off the page, you must initially suspend critical judgment and surrender to the author—*reculer pour mieux sauter*, as the French phrase goes. Berlin described it as a kind of “feeling-oneself-into” the mind of someone grappling with a set of ideas, the same kind of sympathy Herder thought necessary to understand an alien culture. In *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Proust offered a musical metaphor to describe how he used to read as a young man:

As soon as I read an author, I quickly made out beneath the words a kind of tune that in each author is different from that of others, and without realizing it I began to “sing along,” speeding or slowing or interrupting the notes as I read, marking their measures and returns as one does when singing, and waiting a certain time, depending on the song’s pace, before finally uttering the end of a word.... And I think that the boy in me who amused himself this way must be the same one who has a sensitive and accurate ear for hearing the subtle harmony that others don’t hear between two impressions or ideas.

Berlin had this very same gift. He not only heard affinities among seemingly unrelated arguments in a single work, he picked up common intellectual motifs that appeared in thinkers writing in very different times and places. Like melodic phrases that imperceptibly migrate from folk songs to symphonies, where their musical potential gets released, these motifs reflect problems that thinkers have tried to articulate, with only partial success. They are clues. And if you follow them, as Berlin did, you discover where the deeper philosophical difficulties are.

The rewards of this kind of inquiry can be seen in Berlin’s influential writings on the Counter-Enlightenment. Strictly speaking, there was no such thing as a Counter-Enlightenment, no club to join or set of doctrines to profess. It was a term Berlin used to identify a group of dissident modern thinkers dismayed by the dominant trends in European thought since the seventeenth century, which they found mistaken and potentially destructive. Giambattista Vico, writing in provincial Naples in the early eighteenth century, expressed himself very differently from Hamann and Herder in Frederick the Great’s Prussia, or Bonald and Joseph de Maistre in exile after the French Revolution. But their common conviction that something had gone terribly wrong in philosophy inspired them to advance related and quite serious challenges to the reigning Enlightenment outlook. Thanks in part to Berlin, they are being read today by people interested in philosophical problems of mind, language, science, epistemology, culture, history, and political authority. But Berlin’s own writings on them point to deeper issues still.

By reading widely and sympathetically in their writings, Berlin began to understand that what was ultimately at stake for them was not language or epistemology, or even politics in the narrow sense. It was the human good, broadly conceived. What the Counter-Enlightenment saw in the works of Bacon and Descartes, Hobbes and Locke, Kant and Lessing, Voltaire and the editors of the *Encyclopédie*, was a blind act of human self-

assertion whose consequences no one had bothered to calculate (except perhaps Rousseau).

Even if one were to grant that their works established solid foundations for human knowledge and scientific advance, much more fundamental questions remained. What are knowledge and science good for? What role should they play in the lives of the beings we actually are, not the creatures we imagine ourselves to be? What do people convinced of having certain knowledge do to themselves and others? What kind of cost, psychological and social, does the overturning of settled beliefs entail? Can the skeptic live his skepticism? Can whole societies—which must unite different sorts of people (including the young and uneducated) for common purposes, sending some of them off to die—live with uncertainty about ultimate matters?

Early-modern philosophers who faced the resistance of religious authority were forced to think about these questions. Most, figuring that *la verité vaut bien une messe*, genuflected publicly while continuing their revolutionary work in private; a few, like the bold Bacon, laid out the moral and political case for the advancement of learning with military precision. But as the Enlightenment gained adherents over subsequent centuries and the wider public saw the benefits of free inquiry, pressure on the new philosophers and scientists to address the wider implications of their work eased, leaving those who challenged them looking like irrational, anti-philosophical reactionaries. By making the question *What can we know?* paramount, they suppressed the more unsettling one, *Why and what should we want to know?*



Dominique Nabokov

Isaiah Berlin with the Columbia philosopher Sidney Morgenbesser, New York City, 1980s

Berlin's achievement was to have used the history of ideas to recover this latter question and make it urgent once again. If that doesn't count as philosophical activity, it's hard to know what philosophy counts for. But he did more than that, as the table of contents in *Against the Current* shows. The book opens with his wide-angle survey "The Counter-Enlightenment" and ends with essays on nationalism and Georges Sorel, the French defender of revolutionary violence. It is a book that can be profitably read front to back, or back to front. Either way, it shows that the intellectual issues central to the Counter-Enlightenment have also been central to modern historical experience, down to the momentous, horrifying developments that intruded into Berlin's own twentieth-century life.

In the essay on Herzen and his memoirs, *My Past and Thoughts*, we are plunged into a swirl of revolutionary activity in mid-nineteenth-century Europe and Russia, in the company of a lucid pessimist committed to socialism but distrustful of violent fanatics convinced they have discerned the final end of history. We see what can happen to such people in the essay on Sorel, which traces the bloody-minded politics of the will from Belle Epoque anarchism to Italian fascism, then to the Chinese Cultural Revolution and even the Black Panthers. (It was written in 1971.) Other essays introduce us to Moses Hess and Benjamin Disraeli, whose very different Jewish lives illustrate the moral and psychological complexities of reconciling pre-given communal belonging with universal political ideals. The book ends with a sobering reflection on how legitimate national feeling, which Berlin sympathized with and thought would persist, could metastasize into nationalistic ideologies bent on erasing the identity of others.

Isaiah Berlin was a liberal, a child of the Enlightenment. But he was also a grown-up. He knew that the Enlightenment's overconfidence was misplaced, and that its adversaries had raised objections, especially about the value of knowledge, that any serious person must consider. Few liberals are liberal when it comes to their critics. Berlin was. He let them talk and he listened, even if what they expressed came out in shouts or laments, or their ultimate views, like Joseph de Maistre's, he found utterly hateful. They became "cases" offering lessons philosophy could learn from, even if their writings looked far removed from philosophy. This is what Berlin once wrote about J.G. Hamann, whose angry, brilliant, quasi-mystical writings inspired the German Romantics and modern philosophical antirationalism:

Hamann speaks for those who hear the cry of the toad beneath the harrow.... His own

cry came from an outraged sensibility: he spoke as a man of feeling offended by a passion for a cerebral approach; as a moralist who understood that ethics is concerned with relations between real persons;...as a German humiliated by an arrogant and, it seemed to him, spiritually blind West; as a humble member of a dying social order.... If Hamann had not enunciated, in however peculiar a fashion, truths too contemptuously ignored by the triumphant rationalist schools, not only in his own century, but in the great Victorian advance and its continuation in countries that came relatively late to this feast of reason, the movement that he initiated would not have had its formidable consequences on both thought and action, not least in our own terrible century.*

In a sense, Berlin's "cases" in the history of ideas are closer in spirit to the modern sciences than much of what passes for philosophy today. Scientists are empiricists. Asked whether a mechanical part will crack under freezing conditions, their first instinct is to plunge it into an ice bucket and see what happens. Biography and history are to the philosophically inclined historian of ideas roughly what laboratories are to scientists (though nothing in history can be made to repeat itself). One can sit at a seminar table and try to work out the truth conditions of an assertion and the inferences that can be reasonably drawn from it. One can also look to the inferences people actually *have* drawn from it under different conditions, what they thought it implied, and what it inspired them to do. This exercise can reveal intriguing intellectual possibilities that seminar members might overlook.

An example. As a young man Hamann underwent a religious crisis while living alone in London, after which he turned violently against the German *Aufklärer*, including his old friend Immanuel Kant. But on that trip he also discovered Hume's skepticism and became a leading proponent of it in Germany. This seems surprising. After all, Hume's arguments about reason's inability to infer cause from effect were intended to undermine the claims of religion, and the reality of miracles in particular. Hamann, though, argued that by denying religion the support of reason, Hume had also protected it from rational scrutiny, leaving the field open for faith. He wittily observed, in a letter to Kant, that "the Attic philosopher, Hume, needs faith if he is to eat an egg and drink a glass of water." This idiosyncratic take on modern skepticism revealed a genuine weakness in it that Kant immediately recognized: it could sanction irrationalism. The challenge posed by the bitter, obscure Hamann was what put him on the path to the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

But in the history of ideas one mainly studies failure. Which, as scientists know, is far more

fruitful than studying success. Why do philosophers get things wrong? Berlin's essays suggest that in the interesting "cases" it has less to do with faulty reasoning or lack of imagination, than with someone's make-up as a human being or the time when he happened to write. Every argument comes with an arguer, and arguers live in history.

Most philosophers bristle at statements like this, for the understandable reason that people take it to imply that truth is "relative" or "constructed" (whatever that might mean), or that the very idea of truth is a fiction. But they also bristle at the thought that knowing something about these contingent facts contributes something important to the philosophical enterprise. Knowing that Kant was rough on his servant Lampe, they will say, tells us nothing about whether his deduction of the antinomies of pure reason is valid. Which is true, but misleading.

Anyone who immerses himself regularly in the collected works of important thinkers—minor writings, unpublished manuscripts, letters—knows that they are usually all of a piece. They seem to be held together by some centripetal psychological force, even if the author changed his mind about important matters. What is surprising is how rarely one is surprised. Thirty years ago I met a classicist who had gone to college with an American philosopher who had recently become famous for writing a blockbuster announcing that philosophy has no foundations, that it is just a kind of literature. When I asked him about the author, the classicist replied, "He's hated philosophy since he was eighteen."

I remember thinking at the time that I had just learned something about the relation between self-awareness and the quest for truth. In Plato's dialogues what distinguishes Socrates' interlocutors from him is not intelligence, it is awareness of themselves as questioning creatures. The sophists like to make beautiful speeches full of specious arguments, without ever reflecting on the nature of argument and its limitations. Pious old men enjoy talking with Socrates until he shakes their beliefs, at which point they bow out and head for the temples. Young men brimming with self-confidence want to make a splash and gain his approval; when it is withheld they turn vicious. One of the guilty pleasures of reading Plato comes from recognizing human types who claim to want truth, when all they really are after is comfort or recognition or domination or revenge or support for their moral and political prejudices. And the discomfort experienced in reading about them is that you occasionally run across yourself. The dialogues force anyone who thinks he cares about philosophy to take a look in the mirror and ask, *et tu?*

Nothing in the training of academic philosophers encourages that kind of self-scrutiny. But

the history of ideas as Isaiah Berlin practiced it offers something close. Reading him I've often had the sensation of being pulled up by the scruff of the neck, to a point where I finally get some perspective on the narrow range of questions and answers that are occupying me. I don't think I'm alone. The feeling it leaves is a mix of humility and excitement. Humility because you see how parochial and unoriginal you've been, how bound to your time and inclinations, like so many in the past. Humility because you discover old writers living in difficult times whose marginal status or unorthodox manner of expression masked important ideas you can learn from. Humility because you see the larger currents of thought carrying all of us along unawares, and how rare it is that anyone swims against them.

But there is excitement, too, the kind young people get from leaving the provinces for the metropolis. There is so much more to think and talk about philosophically, issues of lasting importance rather than trivial puzzles. You feel freer. Rousseau had it exactly backward: it is in the city that we become autonomous, not in the countryside. By seeing so many more possibilities and circumstances (and failures), we learn to put away childish things and become ourselves. In his essays, covering so many thinkers over so many centuries, Isaiah Berlin created a kind of intellectual city we can explore and grow wiser in, a place where we can finally begin thinking for ourselves. *Against the Current* is an open invitation to visit that city and join the thinning ranks of the undeceived.

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Though it is hard to think of Berlin as a Kipling enthusiast, the verses he quotes from Kipling's *Padgett, M.P.* express something of his own capacity for sympathy and loathing of cruelty:

*The toad beneath the harrow knows
Exactly where each tooth point goes;
The butterfly upon the road
Preaches contentment to that toad*

↳

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