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Isaiah Berlin, 'Historian of Ideas'

By Rev. Charles Brock
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Editor's note: This Jefferson Publications series examines ancient universities that thrive today – how they have shaped the world and influenced education methods, citizenship, the meaning of government, and cultural life. Today's article features Isaiah Berlin.

Sir Isaiah Berlin, (born June 6, 1909, Riga, Latvia, Russian Empire [now in Latvia] – died November 5, 1997, Oxford, England), British philosopher and historian of ideas who was noted for his writings on political philosophy and the concept of liberty. He is regarded as one of the founders of the discipline now known as intellectual history.

Berlin and his family emigrated from the Soviet Union to England in 1920. After leaving St Paul's School in London, Berlin applied to Balliol College, Oxford, but was denied admission after a chaotic interview. Berlin decided to apply again, only to a different college: Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Berlin was admitted and commenced his *literae humaniores degree*. He graduated in 1928, taking first-class honors in his final examinations and winning the John Locke Prize for his performance in the philosophy papers, in which he outscored A. J. Ayer. He subsequently took another degree at Oxford in philosophy, politics and economics, again taking first-class honors after less than a year on the course. He was appointed a tutor in philosophy at New College, Oxford, and soon afterwards was elected to a prize fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford, the first unconverted Jew to achieve this fellowship at All Souls. From 1950 to 1966, he

was Oxford's Chichele professor, served as president of Wolfson College (1966–75), and from 1975 was a professor at All Souls College.

The same publication reported: "Isaiah Berlin was often described, especially in his old age, by means of superlatives: the world's greatest talker, the century's most inspired reader, one of the finest minds of our time." There is no doubt that he showed in more than one direction the unexpectedly large possibilities open to us at the top end of the range of human potential." The front page of *The New York Times* concluded: "His was an exuberant life crowded with joys – the joy of thought, the joy of music, the joy of good friends. ... The theme that runs throughout his work is his concern with liberty and the dignity of human beings .... Sir Isaiah radiated well-being."

Whenever he was described as an English philosopher, Berlin always insisted that he was not an English philosopher but more of a historian of ideas, and would forever be a Russian Jew: "I am a Russian Jew from Riga, and all my years in England cannot change this. I love England, I have been well treated here, and I cherish many things about English life, but I am a Russian Jew; that is how I was born and that is who I will be to the end of my life."

His first important book was *Karl Marx; His Life and Environment* (1939; rev. ed. 1959, 1963), an intellectual biography of Marx that was highly praised for its objectivity. Among his other noted works are *Historical Inevitability* (1955), which stands as a major critique of the doctrines of determinism; *The Age of Enlightenment* (1956), a discussion of 18th-century philosophers; and *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969). Berlin's political philosophy is generally concerned with the problem of liberty and free will in increasingly totalitarian and mechanistic societies. *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (1953), divides the world's thinkers into those (the foxes) who, like Aristotle and Shakespeare, "knew many things," and those (the hedgehogs) who, like Plato and Dante, "knew one big thing."

Though like Jesus and Socrates Berlin did not publish much, he thought and said a great deal and has had an enormous influence on our times.

"*The Hedgehog and the Fox,*" a title referring to a fragment of the ancient Greek poet Archilochus, was one of Berlin's most popular essays with the public, reprinted in numerous editions. Of the classification that gives the essay its title, Berlin once said "I never meant it very seriously. I meant it as a kind of enjoyable intellectual game, but it was taken seriously." The title is a reference to a fragment attributed to the Ancient Greek poet Archilochus: "a fox knows many things, but a hedgehog knows one big thing."

Berlin expands upon this idea to divide writers and thinkers into two categories: hedgehogs, who view the world through the lens of a single defining idea

(examples given include Plato and Marx), and foxes, who draw on a wide variety of experiences and for whom the world cannot be boiled down to a single idea (examples given include William Shakespeare: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Berlin divides writers and thinkers into two categories: hedgehogs, who view the world through the lens of a single defining idea (examples given include Plato, Lucretius, Dante Alighieri, Blaise Pascal, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henrik Ibsen, Marcel Proust and Fernand Braudel), and foxes, who draw on a wide variety of experiences and for whom the world cannot be boiled down to a single idea (examples given include Herodotus, Aristotle, Desiderius Erasmus, William Shakespeare, Michel de Montaigne, Molière, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Aleksandr Pushkin, Honoré de Balzac, James Joyce and Philip Warren Anderson).

Turning to Leo Tolstoy, Berlin contends that at first glance, Tolstoy escapes definition into one of the two groups. He postulates that while Tolstoy's talents are those of a fox, his beliefs are that one ought to be a hedgehog and so Tolstoy's own voluminous assessments of his own work are misleading. Berlin goes on to use this idea of Tolstoy as a basis for an analysis of the theory of history that Tolstoy presents in his novel *War and Peace*. The essay ends with Berlin reiterating his view of Tolstoy – by nature a fox but a hedgehog by conviction – concluding that this duality caused Tolstoy great pain at the end of his life.

James C. Collins refers to this distinction in his 2001 book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't,* where he clearly shows his preference towards hedgehog mentality.

Philip E. Tetlock, a political psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, drew heavily on this distinction in his exploration of the accuracy of experts and forecasters in various fields (especially politics) in his 2005 book *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?*

Some authors such as Michael Walzer have used the same pattern of description for Berlin himself, as a person who knows many things, compared to the purported narrowness of many other contemporary political philosophers. Berlin's former student, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, was dubbed a hedgehog by Berlin and admitted to it after receiving the 2007 Templeton Prize.

Legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin's 2011 book, *Justice for Hedgehogs*, argues the case for a single, overarching, and coherent framework of moral truth.

Harvard political economist Dani Rodrik applies the distinction to "hedgehog" mainstream orthodox economists who apply the "Liberal Paradigm" to

everything everywhere always and "fox" heterodox (political) economists who have different answers to different times, places, and situations in his 2015 book *Economics Rules: The Rights and Wrongs of the Dismal Science*.

Two concepts of liberty[1] – "One of Berlin's most famous works is *Two Concepts of Liberty – (1969)*. Berlin is best known for his inaugural lecture, *Two Concepts of Liberty,* delivered in 1958 as Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford. The lecture introduced the study of political philosophy to the methods of analytic philosophy. Berlin defined "negative liberty" as absence of coercion or interference of private actions by an external political body, which Berlin derived from the Hobbesian definition of liberty. "Positive liberty," Berlin maintained, could be thought of as self-mastery, which asks not what we are free from, but what we are free to do. Berlin contended that modern political thinkers often conflated positive liberty with rational action, based upon a rational knowledge to which, it is argued, only a certain elite or social group has access. This rationalist conflation was open to political abuses, which encroached on negative liberty, when such interpretations of positive liberty were, in the 19th century, used to defend nationalism, paternalism, social engineering, historicism, and collective rational control over human destiny. Lincoln said: "The world has never had a good definition of the word liberty. We all declare for liberty, but in using the same *word* we do not all mean the same *thing*." We must look at the context of the word each time.

To go a bit further in definitions, in the first case negative liberty seems to be a mere absence of something (i.e. of obstacles, barriers, constraints or interference from others), whereas in the second case it seems to require the presence of something (i.e. of control, self-mastery, self-determination or self-realization) Berlin promoted the notion of positive liberty in the sense of an intrinsic link between positive freedom and participatory, Athenian-style, democracy. There is a contrast with negative liberty. Liberals in the English-speaking tradition call for negative liberty, meaning a realm of private autonomy from which the state is legally excluded. In contrast French liberals ever since the French Revolution more often promote "positive liberty" – that is, liberty insofar as it is tethered to collectively defined ends. They praise the state as an essential tool to emancipate the people."

The overall idea is an old one, stemming at least from the Reformation, with the notion of "freedom from and freedom for" referring to God's meaning in the world. Classically, one is freed from sin to love the neighbor – negative and positive. An example of both freedoms can be seen in the Hebrew exodus tradition. The nation is freed from Egyptian slavery – negative freedom – and then given 40 years in the wilderness to develop themselves as a nation of Covenant abiders. The wilderness experience is both a honeymoon (Hosea) and a test (Deuteronomy) – positive freedom.

Value pluralism

With his account of value pluralism, he proposed the view that moral values may be equally, or rather incommensurably, valid, and yet incompatible, and may, therefore, come into conflict with one another in a way that admits of no resolution without reference to particular contexts of a decision. When values clash, it may not be that one is more important than the other: keeping a promise may conflict with the pursuit of truth; liberty may clash with social justice. Moral conflicts are "an intrinsic, irremovable element in human life." "These collisions of values are of the essence of what they are and what we are." For Berlin, this clashing of incommensurate values within, no less than between, individuals, constitutes the tragedy of human life.

Against logical positivism, he maintained throughout his life that many statements that could not be directly verified by empirical observation, or reduced to the description of direct sensory experience, were nevertheless clearly meaningful. Examples were statements about "the past and the future, and absent objects, and other persons, and unrealized possibilities, and general and hypothetical judgements." He also argued that there are certain quasi-conceptual universal truths that are not empirical in the normal sense, because we cannot "think them away," i.e. imagine them to be false; nor are they analytic, because they do not follow straightforwardly from the meanings of the terms they contain. Several examples are given in his paper on "*Synthetic A Priori Propositions,"* for instance "Nothing can look to an observer yellow and blue all over in the same place at the same time" and "You cannot be in two places [at the same time]." Of another example drawn from the properties of colors, "This pink [shade] is more like this vermilion than it is like this black." "I was convinced that my proposition was, if not strictly a priori, self-evidently true, and that its contradictory was not intelligible." Armed with such examples, he warned his colleagues that the principle of verification insisted on by logical positivists would lead to untenable consequences, and would, if not abandoned or considerably revised, breed new fallacies in the place of those it had dispelled.

The grounds for valuing freedom of choice may not be fully spelt out here, but it is not hard to read between the lines. Our ultimate ends are of the greatest importance to our welfare, and are therefore imbued with value; the pluralist's value choices are a vehicle of self-creation; they cannot be delegated to experts, because no single choice is uniquely right, and the judgment that is needed to make one choice rather than another has to be reached autonomously by the situated individual, who alone knows from inside the full context in which a choice has to be made, and is a position to take responsibility for that choice. This is why **choosing** is a valuable activity in and for itself, a central, formative part of human life, independently of its unavoidability.

Berlin acknowledged that there were certain "human sciences" that sought to emulate the aims of the natural sciences, by trying to discover regularities in human behavior, and refining them into explanatory laws. Berlin was very skeptical about such disciplines – economics, sociology, psychology among them – but acknowledged that such scientific studies of human behavior had some value. He maintained, though, that history remained fundamentally different from the natural sciences in its aims and techniques. History is irreducibly different: it is concerned with exploring and understanding individual cases as individual, that is, unique and non-recurrent. It is richer in description and less rigorous in explanation.

Apart from one 1962 essay on ancient Greek individualism (first published 1998, republished in 2002), he devoted scant attention to the history of the ideas in the ancient world. As for the Middle Ages, while Berlin could admit that the period might have been superior to what followed in some respects – greater public order, intellectual security, social cohesion etc. – he regarded it as by and large an intellectually blank period, because of the very stability and conservatism of its intellectual life. Berlin's interest in Renaissance thought was greater, though it yielded only one essay – a suitably original and influential examination of "*The Originality of Machiavelli*" (1972; republished in 1979 and 1997).

These included the ultramontane Catholic reactionary Joseph de Maistre (whom he portrayed as a precursor of fascism and the author of a disturbingly compelling, dark, and savage vision of human life as essentially characterized by violence and terror); the Italian philosopher and critic of scientism Giambattista Vico; and pre-Romantic German opponents of Enlightenment rationalism and universalism such as J. G. Hamann and J. G. Herder.

Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) was very important for Berlin, and he developed his theory of pluralism from him and others. "Vico was the true father of the modern concept of culture and of what one might call cultural pluralism, according to which each authentic culture has its own unique vision."[2] Previously people assumed that there was a culture that would be fair to all and answer the questions of unity. Oneness was the theme and the goal of decent society. Vico freed us from that misconception and allowed a variety of cultures to exist in the world, not one better than the other. Cultural pluralism is "a panorama of a variety of cultures, the pursuit of different, and sometimes incompatible, ways of life, ideals, standards of value."[3] But within each culture there must standards of virtue, justice, and care for others.

It seems most consistent with his most frequent usage elsewhere to say that he regards (at least some) human values as "absolute" in the sense that they are irreducibly distinct ends-in-themselves, valuable each in its own right, and not just in terms of some other value (or super-value). Thus, he holds, for example

(and against utilitarianism), that justice, liberty, enlightenment and so on are each *sui generis*, valuable intrinsically rather than instrumentally, i.e. not just because and in so far as they conduce to the super-value of happiness (though they may do this too). From this it follows that these values are, by virtue of this "absoluteness," or distinctness of intrinsic value, *incommensurable*: that is, they cannot be weighed or measured against one another on a single scale, in terms of a single metric.

He values Tolstoy as one of the greatest writers of Russian history and literature. But is wrong about historical forces. "Tolstoy's central thesis – in some respects not unlike the inevitable "self-deception" of the bourgeoise held by his contemporary Karl Marx, save that what Marx reserves for a class, Tolstoy sees in almost all mankind – is that there is a natural law whereby the lives of human beings no less than that of nature are determined, but that men, unable to face this inexorable process, seek to represent it as a succession of free choices …"[4]

"Thus, it is that Tolstoy's "programme action" makes the heroic assumption, denied by Berlin's pluralism and by common human experience, but affirmed nevertheless in the mainstream of Western tradition, that there is a path of development for mankind as a whole, if not for each of its individual members, on which all its faculties and powers can be fully and harmoniously expressed. But it also amounts to a denial of these various historical forces, whose movements are inexorable and indifferent to our moral ideals, on which in his novels Tolstoy so adamantly insisted.[5]

Berlin also frequently suggests that these values are "absolute" in another, related sense, close to that of "universal": their claims on us are non-relative, not only to other values (liberty does not derive its value solely from its contribution to happiness), but also to circumstances (liberty does not derive its value from being part of or contributing to a certain way of life, or allowing for success in a particular situation; it is valuable for all human beings, as such).

Yet Berlin does also use "absolute" in a number of places to indicate inviolability or un-cancellability: in this sense, for a value to be "absolute" means that it cannot be overruled, and he speaks of "an absolute right to refuse to behave inhumanly." This understanding of the absoluteness of values is harder to square with the idea of balances or compromises between values. Instead, Berlin acknowledges, or insists, that when such balancing or compromising occurs, there is a genuine loss or sacrifice: we may, for instance, sacrifice a certain degree of liberty for the sake of equality or security, but we should acknowledge that, in doing so, we are sacrificing something that remains valuable, and that therefore this sacrifice is to be regretted.

In light of this, Berlin's **Zionism** has been the subject of controversy. Some critics have complained that it led him to turn a blind eye to injustice and tacitly

approve of Israeli chauvinism. This was not so. Berlin was a liberal and humane Zionist; he believed in the justice and necessity of a Jewish homeland, but also opposed violence, nationalist aggression, and chauvinism wherever they appeared. Indeed, his aversion to political radicalism led him to support the moderate, pro-British Chaim Weizmann against more assertive Zionist leaders such as David Ben-Gurion in the 1940s, even when it became apparent that Ben-Gurion's strategy was likely to be more effective than Weizmann's in establishing a Jewish state. Later in life Berlin was a quiet but firm, and at times privately vehement, critic of the Likud bloc and of Israeli policy in the West Bank and Gaza, and a supporter of the Peace Now movement and a "two-state solution" to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

What does this mean for education today?

The **fox and the hedgehog** analogy can be applied to our universities today and their method of "majors." Unlike previous centuries, most colleges and universities now require you to choose a course that is focused on only one thing – say, for example, architecture. You spend four to five years learning how to conceive and build things. Some colleges may insist that you study a few other subjects along with your major, and they might make you take an elective or two that isn't in your field. It may relate to your field obliquely but that is not necessary. You might take a course in medieval history or Black novels, and you may find connections to your major, or not. It is not part of the elective to insist on connections to your major.

Wouldn't it be better to have you take at least one course in modern society to prepare you for knowledge of what is going on and perhaps to join in the democratic process later?

When it comes to **two concepts of liberty**, we have a useful tool for and academic analysis of contemporary society. Take the example of race relations today. It is negative freedom to free the African Americans both from chattel slavery and Jim Crow regulations – it is positive freedom to give them the ways and means to better themselves educationally, economically, and politically. Other groups fall into these categories – the rural poor, the immigrants, the uneducated, the long-term ill, single mothers, and a host of others.

There are challenges to this view from all sides, and it would be necessary to go through them to do a complete analysis. Suffice it to say that freedoms will vary over time and geographically. It is up to those who feel reduced by individuals or their society or international affairs to speak up and try to find answers to their issues.

It might be helpful to look at Abraham Lincoln. He believed freedom and liberty were divinely planted in our hearts. He did not make the distinction between

two types of liberty but unified the concept both secular and sacred. “Our reliance is in the *love of liberty* which God has planted in our bosoms. Our defense is in the preservation of the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands, everywhere. Destroy this spirit, and you have planted the seeds of despotism around your own doors. Familiarize yourselves with the chains of bondage, and you are preparing your own limbs to wean them. Accustomed to trample on the rights of those around you, you have lost the genius of your own independence, and become the fit subjects of the first cunning tyrant who rises.”[6] And there are plenty of the latter.

Value Pluralism is an important set of ideas for all students to study. The thesis is that there are various cultures with separate ideals and values that should live together rather than assuming one is better than another. Currently America is divided between those who want to impose a religious nation upon us with a series of repressions that the majority do not want, and others who demand an open society to hold whatever beliefs they desire.

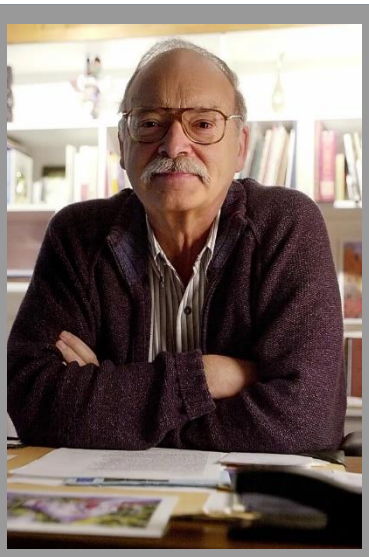
Both are dangerous. The first can lead to authoritarianism; the second to a chaotic world with no leading values such as justice and mercy. We should consider Berlin’s value pluralism with his proviso that there is “an absolute right to refuse to behave inhumanly.” Other values should be examined that are important for a society to remain peaceful [“shalom” means justice, health, wealth, victory, well-being] without constant altercations, but at the same time allowing for freedom of speech unless it leads to insurrection.

Zionism and the position of the Jews throughout the world need to be discussed, as well as the general persecution of minorities whether religious or secular. America today is going through a phase of anti-Semitism as fraught as the 1930’s.

In conclusion, Berlin in his many phases and ideas makes a liberal offering to the world that we badly need against authoritarianism. It needs to be taught, discussed, argued, and understood. The future of our society is on trial. Centers of learning need to be aware and teach these issues, otherwise we could go down in flames.

[1] *Positive and Negative Liberty,* Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Thu Feb 27, 2003; substantive revision Fri Nov 19, 2021
[2] Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed Henry Hardy, Vintage Books, 1992, p 59
[3] Ibid p 6
[4] Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox,* Penguin p 79, pp 41-42
[5] John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin,* Princeton UP, 1996, pp 86-87
[6] Collected Works 3.95, Sept 11, 1858, at Edwardsville Ill reported by Alton *Weekly Courier,* Sept 16, 1858

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rev. Charles Brock, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pa., and he is a Founding Member of the Jefferson Educational Society. Rev. Brock serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and serves as Secretary of the Jefferson Educational Society's Board of Trustees.

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