EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Why Berlin? Why Now?

Joshua L. Cherniss and Steven B. Smith

Isaiah Berlin (1909–97) was a central figure in twentieth-century political thought, his name and work inseparable from the larger revival of political philosophy, and the related analysis of political extremism and defense of democratic liberalism, that followed World War II. His classic essay "Two Concepts of Liberty" remains a staple of courses in political theory, while "The Hedgehog and the Fox" has furnished a durable metaphor for discussing the temperaments and philosophies of politicians and intellectuals. Berlin's many essays on the history of ideas, principally in the period between the French and Russian Revolutions, did much to promote interest in this field in the English-speaking world. While his interpretations of individual thinkers, and characterization of the central struggle between Enlightenment and Romantic thought, bear the marks of the ideological struggles and academic standards of their time, and have accordingly been challenged by later historians (and now are seldom accepted without considerable qualification), they continue to provoke further reconsiderations of these topics – and provide, if nothing else, the foil against which scholars continue to pit themselves.

Perhaps Berlin's most profound influence, as some of the chapters of this volume confirm, has been his articulation of a pluralistic conception of ethics, which began to be recognized as a significant, and challenging, position in moral and political philosophy. Since Berlin's death, debates about the nature, cogency, and validity of Berlin's pluralism – and the sustainability of his linkage between pluralism and liberalism – have continued to grow. So has interest in Berlin's life and intellectual career, fueled by the ongoing publication of unpublished writings by his editor, Henry Hardy, which has furnished scholars and general readers with an increasingly complete record of Berlin's thought. This still-growing body of work has inspired a truly global readership, with Berlin's work translated into numerous languages. There has been particular interest in Berlin among readers and scholars in Latin America and East Asia, particularly Japan, China, and South Korea, the latter two of which

have recently hosted conferences on Berlin's work; Berlin is also commemorated with an annual conference in his native Riga.

While Berlin's most cherished commitments and allegiances are clear enough, much in his thought is ambiguous – and controversial. Controversy has raged, particularly, over the relationship between Berlin's commitment to liberalism, and his assertion of ethical pluralism, and over the meaning and validity of the claims involved in Berlin's pluralism. Berlin is also, appropriately, a subject of political controversy. Both his own political position and the political (or ideological) implications of his ideas have been hotly debated. He has been both praised and attacked as an intellectual Cold Warrior – and for the relative mildness of his anticommunism. Berlin's reformulation of liberalism has been charged with contributing to the growth of a "thinner," more morally neutral, unambitious, and dispiritingly "negative" form of liberalism, even as it has also been criticized for tying liberalism to a controversial moral doctrine and ideal of character. The coherence of Berlin's championing of a "negative" conception of liberty, understood strictly as the absence of interference, and his support for the welfare state, have also been questioned. Some have associated Berlin (for better or worse) with libertarian theory and neoliberal politics, while others have found in his pluralism resources for critiques of an unqualified embrace of the free market.

One challenge any reader of Berlin confronts concerns the question of genre. Berlin wrote in a variety of registers: from the Oxford analytical style early in his career, to studies in the history of ideas, to "personal impressions" or *éloges* written in the manner of the great French funeral oration. His preferred genre was the essay. Other than his early biography of Karl Marx, all of Berlin's later works were essays, many of them individual pieces written for occasional purposes. This was perhaps deliberate. To use Pascal's distinction, philosophy was for him more a matter of the *esprit de finesse* than the *esprit de geometrie*. He understood that philosophy was a matter not simply of logic, but of persuasion. Among philosophical writers of the last century, he is rivaled only by Michael Oakeshott as a master of English prose. He was capable of painting on a broad canvas as well as working in miniature. His work often took the form of intellectual portraits of key figures in the history of political thought, from Vico and Herder to Machiavelli, Marx, Tolstoy, and de Maistre, as well as notable contemporaries such as J. L. Austin, Chaim Weizmann, Franklin Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill.

This raises another important set of questions. Was Berlin a philosopher at all, and does his work have traction beyond the period of the Cold War in which it arose? Our answer to both of the above is "yes." Although Berlin never wrote a comprehensive tome on politics to rival works such as Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* or Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, we believe that his work was instrumental in the revival of political theory at a time when it had been declared all but moribund. Like another contemporary, Leo Strauss, Berlin's essays often took the form of a commentary on other authors, yet he used this medium to

engage the central philosophical problems of his time. These include the problem of liberty and coercion, the issues of determinism and responsibility, the philosophy of the social sciences, the themes of monism and pluralism, the conflict between Enlightenment and romanticism, and the role of nationalism and Jewish identity. The chapters included in this volume testify to the wide range of Berlin's philosophical, political, and literary interests, but rather than focus on his interpretation of particular figures in the history of ideas, we have preferred to highlight the general themes that these writings were intended to illuminate.

This volume is divided into four parts. Part I contains accounts of "Berlin the Man." This includes a biographical portrait by Joshua Cherniss and Henry Hardy (Chapter 2) which provides an overview of Berlin's life and work, situating it within his Russian, Jewish, and British contexts. Underlying Berlin's multifarious intellectual concerns, they argue, is a kind of "humanism" that gave voice to the primacy of freedom of choice, a recognition of the conflict of basic values, and an emphasis on the irreducible uniqueness of the individual. In Part II, "Berlin on Philosophy, the Human Sciences, and Political Theory," Naomi Choi (Chapter 3) examines the underappreciated role of the Oxford analytical movement in shaping Berlin's thought. Although Berlin was never a logical positivist, his questions were often framed in response to the dominance of positivism in the interwar period. Berlin's repudiation of the belief in the efficacy of scientific method to solve the problems of ethics and politics was central to the late-twentieth-century revival of political theory in which he played so notable a part. Joshua Cherniss (Chapter 4) explicates Berlin's account of political judgment, and shows how this account contributed to, and was motivated by, Berlin's opposition to scientistic reductionism and abstraction in the study of, and programs of technocratic control in the ruling of, human beings and societies. Cherniss also explores Berlin's account of good political judgment in action – and his distinction between very different types of successful, or "great," political leaders – through an examination of Berlin's discussions of those individual leaders to whom he devoted extensive discussion: Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and Chaim Weizmann.

Part III is titled "Berlin and the History of Ideas." Ryan Patrick Hanley (Chapter 5) traces the continuities between Berlin's work as an analytical philosopher and his later self-definition and work as a "historian of ideas," as well as Berlin's reasons for making this shift. Through an explication of Berlin's conception and practice of the history of ideas, Hanley argues that this shift was "a political decision – albeit in a very particular sense." Berlin's practice of the history of ideas was also connected to his political thought in that both reflected similar (though distinct) conceptions of human understanding: the "sense of reality" and "political judgment." While Berlin's approach to the history of ideas, on Hanley's account, reflected views on both the demands of historical understanding, and the purpose of studying past ideas and thinkers, he neither

thought extensively about, nor programmatically stated, nor rigorously deployed, any particular "method," there is no "Berlinian" approach to the history of ideas or the interpretation of texts. Berlin's interpretations were, instead, guided by his personal, intuitive response to individual thinkers, with whom he engaged as partners in a conversation about political and moral issues. These personal responses, amplified by the ideological conflicts of his time, sometimes produced skewed or simplified presentations of thinkers – such as Rousseau or Hegel – whose ideas were far more complex and rich than Berlin allowed. But his sensitivity to the interplay of ideas and personal circumstances could also produce brilliant insights. And Berlin's accounts were, above all, never dull.

Berlin's political commitments certainly inflected his response to Marxism and to Russian thought – though he was never the dogmatic "Cold Warrior" that some readers have perceived. Aurelilan Craiutu (Chapter 6) shows how Berlin acknowledged Marx as a major interlocutor and epoch-making force in history and took a strong interest in the founders of Marxism (if not in the Marxist theorists of his own day). Yet Berlin was drawn in the end to Herzen, whom he saw as a better guide to the events of the twentieth century. Craiutu's chapter highlights some of the reasons why Berlin could never have been a Marxist, the most important being his commitment to pluralism and his opposition to determinism in history. Kathleen Parthé (Chapter 7) discusses Berlin's early exposure to the language, culture, and history of Russia, including some of the events of 1917, which he witnessed first-hand. This Russian background gave him "privileged access" to some of the leading personalities who shaped Russia's evolution and to the ideas they embodied. His two great loves were the Moscow intelligentsia circles of the 1840s and the Russian poets of the Soviet era, especially Akhmatova, Pasternak, and Mandelstam, and he celebrated their unconditional love for artistic and personal freedom with an eloquence that has not been surpassed. Berlin brought his deep knowledge of Russia's intellectual and cultural history to his study of the USSR, and of positive and negative liberty.

Steven Smith (Chapter 8) examines the role that the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment play in Berlin's thought, how each holds up a mirror to the other. He argues that the Enlightenment and its romantic *doppelgänger* represent "two ends of a chain": the first focused on certain universal human values, the second on an appreciation of moral and political variety. Smith concludes that this tension – this unresolved and fruitful tension – provides the West with its peculiar vitality. Gina Gustavvson (Chapter 9) explores the role of European romanticism in Berlin's political theory. Berlin, she argues, believed that the romantic revolution could be summarized in terms of two main movements. One is the step from a monistic to a pluralistic understanding of values and human existence: the belief that values are created rather than found. The other shift consists in the ascent of a "new set of values" in the realms of moral and political life: the unbounded expression of the will, self-

realization, sincerity, and dedication. She argues that the romantic insights into value pluralism inspired his own anti-utopian liberalism, but the celebration of the unfettered will was something he urged liberals to avoid, since it risks leading to the infamous inversion of liberty into tyranny.

Part IV is titled "Berlin and Politics: Liberalism, Nationalism, and Pluralism." Fania Oz-Salzberger (Chapter 10) develops Berlin's controversial ideas about nationalism, and especially his lifelong adherence to Zionism. Berlin's ideas about Zionism, Oz-Salzberger writes, grew out of his own family history. He thought of Zionism as a liberal and humane alternative to the "pathological" forms of European nationalism. Zionism was unique among nationalisms because, rather than foreclosing choice, it actually increased the scope of negative liberties. Henceforth, Jews could exercise a choice between country of birth or ancestral homeland, between diasporic Judaism and life in a Jewish state. Connecting Berlin's thought and political commitments in a different way, Ian Shapiro and Alicia Steinmetz (Chapter 11) frame Berlin's analysis of liberty within the context of the Cold War. Drawing on the wealth of new evidence that has become available due to the publication of Berlin's letters, they show that Berlin's defense of negative liberty was indeed rooted in the antipathy for the Soviet Union that he shared with such contemporaries as Friedrich Hayek, Karl Popper, and George Kennan. But Berlin's account was distinctive in that he also explored the underlying insecurities that rendered people susceptible to positive liberty's allure. This exploration left him skeptical that negative liberty would triumph once communism collapsed unless the sources of that insecurity could be addressed.

Alan Ryan (Chapter 12) also addresses Berlin's account of liberty, offering both a sketch of Berlin's famous essay "Two Concepts of Liberty," as well as his own dissent from Berlin's analysis. Ryan dissents from Berlin in holding that there is one correct, basically positive, conception of liberty, and finds Berlin's discussion of liberty to be in crucial respects insufficiently political. Ryan brings out the force of this latter criticism through a comparison of Berlin's essay with the liberalism of Benjamin Constant, arguing that Constant was more attentive to the institutional face of liberty and the practice of active citizenship to protect the private freedoms prized by liberals. He concludes that Berlin's articulation of liberalism is valuable in giving voice to an attractive and wise liberal sensibility and temper, but that this needs supplementing with a greater engagement with the concrete challenges of politics.

George Crowder argues that Berlin's idea of value pluralism – that basic human values are multiple, potentially conflicting, and "incommensurable" – has been one of his most controversial. Among several issues, an especially vexed question is whether Berlin's pluralism is consistent with his liberalism. Pluralism seems to point to a multiplicity of legitimate political choices of which liberalism is at best only one, not superior to any other. Crowder finds several responses to this problem in Berlin's writing, but he argues that none of these is wholly satisfactory. He concludes that stronger links between pluralism and

liberalism will build on Berlin's work but go beyond it, and he sketches some possibilities along those lines. William Galston (Chapter 14) argues that Berlin offers a principled account of the relation between pluralism and liberalism. Berlinian pluralism provides a platform against both dogmatic libertarianism with its embrace of laissez-faire economics, and against radical relativists who see no way of resolving basic conflicts of values. For Berlin, value pluralism provides a "rational basis" for distinguishing between defensible and indefensible regimes. These regimes may not always be liberal, Galston argues, but "they will be broadly consistent with at least the minimal requirements" of liberalism.

The volume is sandwiched between two remarkable essays. One is a personal recollection of Berlin by the celebrated Israeli novelist Amos Oz (Chapter 1), who recalls his first meeting, as a budding 29-year-old author, with Berlin in 1969 at his home in Oxford. The other is a little-known lecture – "The Lessons of History" (Chapter 15) – by Berlin himself, dating from 1966.

As should be clear from the above, and from the chapters that follow, Berlin's work often inspired admiration rather than discipleship. He not only pointed to the inability of systematic theory to do justice to a complex reality, but followed through with this insight by adopting an unsystematic, even impressionistic approach. Berlin was incapable of the sorts of scholarly rigor (or pedantry) and theoretical sophistication (or obfuscation) at which others excelled; he was also uninterested, in principle, in delivering the final, conversation-ending verdict on the topics he discussed. Yet examination suggests that not only was Berlin a significant figure in the intellectual history of his time, his work continues to have much to tell contemporary readers – about liberty and liberalism, the Enlightenment and Romanticism, the perils of monism and wisdom of pluralism, as well as, more broadly, about the practice of political theory, history, and the social sciences, the ethical challenges confronting political actors, and the nature and importance of practical judgment for both politics and scholarship. One of Berlin's many friends – the Yale Slavic scholar Victor Erlich – summed it up admirably: Berlin, he concluded, "managed to tackle with incisiveness and subtlety some of the most vital moral–political themes of our time. No one has made a more eloquent and nuanced case for pluralism"; and few have written about the history of ideas with, as Erlich added, such "generosity of spirit" (Erlich 2006, 167–8). Berlin's work constitutes a sweeping and profound defense of political, ethical, and intellectual humanism in a virulently anti-humanistic age.

Perhaps most importantly, Berlin emphasized the significance of political judgment as the central virtue of political theory. As several of the chapters emphasize, Berlinian political theory was less about building architectonic systems based on justice, rights, or even liberty than about a careful attention to the conflict between even the most basic political goods. Politics, on his account, was not so much a war between good and evil as between rival goods, and a matter of choosing the lesser of two (or more) evils. This could

be achieved not by developing a systematic theory of the good life or the good society, but through honing the art of political judgment. It was the art of practical rationality that distinguished not only the great statesmen of the past but also the great political thinkers, from Aristotle to Machiavelli to Tocqueville. We think it best to conclude by letting Berlin speak in his own voice:

> The quality I am attempting to describe is that special understanding of public life (or for that matter private life) which successful statesmen have, whether they are wicked or virtuous – that which Bismarck had . . ., or Talleyrand or Franklin Roosevelt, or, for that matter, men such as Cavour or Disraeli, Gladstone or Ataturk, in common with the great psychological novelists, something which is conspicuously lacking in men of more purely theoretical genius such as Newton or Einstein or Russell, or even Freud.
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> What are we to call this kind of capacity? Practical wisdom, practical reason, perhaps, a sense of what will work and what will not. It is a capacity . . . for synthesis rather than analysis, for knowledge in the sense in which trainers know their animals, or parents their children, or conductors their orchestras, as opposed to that in which chemists know the contents of their test tubes, or mathematicians know the rules that their symbols obey. Those who lack this, whatever other qualities they may possess, no matter how clever, learned, imaginative, kind, noble, attractive, gifted in other ways they may be, are correctly regarded as politically inept. (SR 58–9)