An Exchange with Professor Sir Isaiah Berlin

[During the 1995-96 academic year, I had the opportunity to take a break from my doctoral studies in Oxford and spend a year in Paris studying at the Sorbonne. When I had informed Berlin, with whom I had been meeting occasionally to discuss my work, that I was going, he seemed rather taken aback. "You're not going to study under that Derrida fellow, are you?" he asked, worried. "No," I replied, "I'm not into that stuff at all," (no longer the case). "Good," he said, relieved. "Because you know, he's a *charlatan*!"

   While in Paris I continued, by post, the discussions that I had begun with Berlin in Oxford. After I had sent him an early draft of a paper which was later to make up part of the second chapter of my book, *From Pluralist to Patriotic Politics*, Berlin replied with a typically eloquent letter. As I consider the exchange between us that followed to be particularly revealing of the central issues at stake in that work, I thought I'd post excerpts (slightly edited) from the letters for those who might find them of interest. C.B.]

<div align="right">Oxford, March 19, 1996</div>

Dear Mr. Blattberg,

   . . . I have read your piece on liberalisms, with great interest, as you may imagine. I think it is a very intelligent, perceptive analysis of the various types of pluralism (I cannot deny that I am pleased that you should have attributed fatherhood to me, even though, in my modesty, I claim James Fitzjames Stephen as my ancestor). I do not think that my early views on this subject are much acknowledged – so much the better, I am free from the appalling controversy which would otherwise have occurred; there was quite enough attack upon my views to fill my lifetime – I am content to leave matters as they are. No doubt the twenty-fifth century will recognise my eminence.

   Now, about your views. I repeat, I think your distinctions are clear and valuable and should be published. As for the substance of what you say, namely, patriotic and republican liberalism, I cannot bring myself to go all the way with you or Charles Taylor – or, I suppose, Bernard Crick. Why can't I? Because, although I would agree that pluralism as a field of battle won't do, that mere accommodation, tolerance, trade-offs, which I have often advocated, are not enough, that there has to be in a given society some central way of solidarity, giving it some kind of collective quality, purpose, texture, without which things disintegrate – although I agree with all this, I do not believe that your (and I suppose Taylor's) optimistic hope that all these apparently distinct functions, ways of life, activities, e.g. civil society, the state, private life, the market, etc., etc., can not merely be adjusted but in some way so re-categorised as somehow to be able to form, if not an organic at any rate a whole which transcends the differences. I think we talked about that when you came to see me. When I urged incompatibility between, say, liberty and equality, you gave the impression of some desire to achieve a

Hegelian synthesis, a re-consideration of these things in such a way that they form part of some embracing higher whole, which might have differences within it (plurality and unity) but which nevertheless in the end can be made to cohere. I don't believe this. I think there is conflict between values, ways of life, etc. What I would urge is that there must be some central direction, some over-arching unity in a tolerable community or state (e.g. a central language, not merely a plurality, as demanded in the USA today), which integrates and unites – not completely, but nevertheless connects the different and sometimes conflicting groups, ideals, ways of life – what you, I think, would call nationalism or patriotism.

The only thing I would urge is that no matter how pluralistic one is, if one has what is called a liberal or democratic society (the two are not the same – still, they are compatible), then any group whose purpose is to destroy this, can only be tolerated if it is not formidable, not a serious danger. If they do become that, then they must be eliminated, legislated against, so that Walzer's complete pluralism should not be regarded as the end-all – there is a case for coercion, for censorship. At the extremes, no doubt, so long as the society in general can be regarded as an interwoven, interlinked whole, despite all the various drives, differences, changes, tastes, Wittgensteinian ways of life.

I don't know if I have made myself at all clear, but you will see the general drive of what I am saying. So far so good – or so far so bad, you may say. I can't go all the way with you, but three-quarters of the way, yes – I think you are right to put me on the right side of the divide, although I hanker after an ideal, not conflicting, pluralism of totally distinct ways of life. I know this is neither possible nor desirable, but that is where my inclinations lie. But you are right; what I have said and what I believe is not fully compatible with that.

Yours ever,

Sir Isaiah Berlin

Paris, April 17, 1996

Dear Professor Berlin,

. . . As for your letter, let me begin by admitting that, though I have read and reread it numerous times, I'm still not wholly confident in my interpretation, and at times consider it (my interpretation that is) far too presumptuous. That being said, here, for what it's worth, is how I have come to see matters between us vis-à-vis morals and politics.

Let us say that there are, crudely put, three positions open to the moral and political philosopher: (i) pluralism; (ii) monism or unity; and (iii) one in-between the other two, which I'll call hermeneutics (in the sense of the term first affirmed by Martin Heidegger). As I now interpret our exchanges, I have been claiming that you follow (and, even, have founded!) (i), when, at the end of the day, you really support something like (iii);

while you think that I concur with, say, Aristotle and Hegel on (ii), when in fact I also support a version of (iii). Resting with the theme of moral conflict, here's how I understand the three positions. Pluralists see goods as separate or independently distinct concepts which, when they clash, have to be balanced or compromised against each other in a way appropriate to the context. And this means that moral or political conflicts cannot be met without some moral loss to one or more of the conflicting goods. This is so, however, only because one has not been able to find an instrumental route to doing an 'end-run' around the conflict. Without this, the pluralist might be said to claim that one must accept that one is being confronted by a *genuine* normative conflict, and so some moral loss, as with all such genuine conflicts, is inescapable.

The followers of (ii) live in a completely different world or, should I say, cosmos. For, to them, matters are such that all goods are, at least in principle, reconcilable with each other. Where, to the pluralist, genuine moral conflicts *always* result in moral loss, to the monist, reason (or intuition, or whatever) can *always* be used to get us out of such conflicts without compromise if only we know/understand them well enough. Of course, some monists are more sophisticated than others, with Hegel being probably the richest of them all in his recognition of differences and particularities within a relatively historical conception of the whole. But though he claims to grant a place to plurality, this is always within the dialectical unity of *Geist*. Something similar is behind the classic (and, in my opinion, correct) interpretation of Aristotle, despite the claims of such recent students of his thought as Martha Nussbaum. And so, ultimately, for the advocates of (ii), moral reality remains a unified phenomenon. If the agent can only grasp this unity correctly, it is claimed, he should be able to overcome any moral conflict without loss, without compromise. Often, however, he is unable to do this, that is, often he finds himself unable to 'solve' a particular moral dilemma. But this is said to be due to an error on his part, not one of reason itself. In principle, the claim goes, there always exists a route to reconciling conflicting goods, and to doing so without moral loss. What we have here, then, is, as a friend of mine once dismissively referred to it, an 'everybody's a winner' philosophy.

All this, of course, you know (indeed, I learned a great deal of it from studying your own work). Where I find myself disagreeing with that work, however, is in the view, often expressed by pluralists, that these two are, broadly speaking, the only alternatives. For I claim to follow (iii), and I am increasingly coming to believe that this is where your inclinations lie as well, though I fail to see evidence of it in your published writings. In your letter you state that you can't go all the way with me, "but three quarters of the way, yes." On the supposition that you consider my position a case of (ii), and that you see yourself as coming from (i), then this would, I think, place you somewhere in the world of (iii). That you are not wholly satisfied with (i) certainly seems supported by your statement that: "What I would urge is that there must be some central direction, some over-arching unity in a tolerable community or state . . . which integrates and unites, not completely, but nevertheless connects the different and sometimes conflicting groups, ideals, ways of life." Indeed, the first few times I read that sentence, I found it so striking that, for a little while, I believed there was a typo in it, and that you meant to write "What *you* would urge . . ." instead. But I don't think so anymore.

So what, then, is this third way that I now claim we both more or less share? Put succinctly, it affirms that, when confronted by a genuine moral conflict, *sometimes* there is a way out without moral loss, and *sometimes* there is not ("Way to take a stand, Charles," is how someone once reacted to my summing up the approach in this way). This is different from pluralism in that the way out without any moral loss is not as a

result of instrumental reasoning (though this remains, in some cases, an option), but is due to a re-integration of the conflicting goods through the re-articulation of their meanings. This integrative route is not open to the pluralist for a number of reasons, one of which I want to put forward here.

Regarding conceptual meaning, the conceptual atomism of pluralism ensures that compromise, and not integration, remains the only reasonable response to a moral conflict. It's as if the agent approaches a given context carrying with him a bag of billiard balls, each representing one of the goods constitutive of his identity. In the case of a conflict between two goods, he responds by reaching into his bag and taking out the appropriate balls, one in each hand. Since the two goods they represent, being separate, have 'clashed' or 'collided' with each other, his challenge is to take on the role of a scale and to try to balance them *against* each other in a way appropriate to the circumstance. Raising his left hand means lowering his right, and vice versa, and he proceeds to do this until the right balance is struck.

The hermeneuticist interprets the agent's situation differently. For goods are conceived not as atomic concepts, but as holistic practices. Instead of reaching in his bag for the appropriate billiard balls to apply, he has no need to *apply* any such independently distinct things because, as if on its own accord, emerging from the background to that context is a resonating web in which *all* his goods are to some extent integrated. The moral conflict he is facing has caused a tension or incoherence in a certain region of the web to be emphasized, and his task is to try and find a way to transform the whole so as to smooth out the rough spot(s). If he was dealing with inert, separate billiard balls, however, integration would not be an option. But depending on who he is at that time, that is, on the structural make-up of his whole web, as well as the specific situation he is in, the agent may be able to find a way to carry out the re-integration. If not, this could very possibly be due, not to any faulty reasoning on his part, but simply to the moral reality in which he is set. If he does find a way of performing the re-integration, then we could say that he has been able to reason his way out of the conflict with little if any moral loss; if not, then he has no choice but to turn to something like the compromising sort of practical reasoning that we have with the pluralist, and its zero-sum dynamics will ensure that some moral loss will be inevitable.

Sometimes yes, sometimes no; from amongst the many towards the one. These are the essentials of (iii). There is one more remark in your letter which makes me think that it is indeed here that you ultimately end up. For at the end of the letter, you describe your ideal, which, as with any supporter of (iii), is ultimately the unity too-hastily assumed by (ii). And then you write: "I know this is neither possible nor desirable, but that is where my inclinations lie." You are quite obviously torn here, and in a way which, if I may be so bold, is quintessentially Jewish. For if we interpret (ii) as a form of heaven, then feeling torn seems to me to sum-up the characteristically Jewish response to this possibility. Where Odysseus, in typically ancient Greek fashion, found it all-too-easy to decline Calypso's offer of paradisal immortality, the Jew is necessarily much more equivocal. That, at least, is how I would react and, as I am increasingly coming to appreciate, I am far from an untypical Jew myself.

Regardless, let me close here by re-iterating how much I appreciate and have enjoyed these opportunities to exchange views with you. With very best wishes, I remain,

Yours sincerely,

Charles

Oxford, April 25, 1996

Dear Charles,

Thank you ever so much for your very full and clear and interesting letter of 17 April.

Alas, I cannot subscribe to (iii): I still hold onto the fact that some values clash – that equality and liberty cannot be fully fulfilled together; that justice and mercy cannot both be fulfilled, and this can lead to really agonizing choices. Of course I agree with you – and I think you understand that – but I don't think it leads to your position – that unless there is enough common ground between societies, between every possible human combination – unless there is enough in common (common beliefs, common values in other words), no peace can exist at all, no harmony can be established. Of course the number of values which humans pursue is finite, and because they are finite we can understand and even to some degree sympathise with them all, even when we reject them: given that there is enough common value to make human communication possible, to make human beings understand each other's differences. Given that, then of course you could say that apparent collisions could, perhaps, be resolved in terms of universally, or even locally, accepted values. But this does not mean that when there is a real collision this route can always be taken. And there, I am afraid, I have to fall back on the feeble expedient of compromise (trade-offs), so much for this so much for that, an order of priorities, so much equality so much liberty, so much legally enforced justice so much humanity, pity, understanding, etc., etc., etc. In other words, the uneasy compromise, the precarious balance between possible ways of action or thought – always collapsing, always needing mending, but above all avoiding that monism which always in my opinion crushes resistance at too high a cost, and politically for the most part leads to coercion and blood. I fear you won't agree.

Yours,

Isaiah