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Taylor, Charles, contribution to 'An American Remembrance' of Isaiah Berlin held at the British Embassy in Washington on 28 January 1998

Tribute by Charles Taylor

What does Isaiah Berlin's life and work mean for philosophy, or more broadly, for thought? What will its meaning be? What did he leave us?

Well, first, he kept his head in this terrible century when so many of the best minds lost theirs. Isaiah was a supporter of the Enlightenment, committed to the Enlightenment values of freedom, reason, of the primacy of rational discourse over violent means. And yet he very early realised that the Enlightenment left to itself as a single-minded project can bring about the very opposite of itself. Very young he had a ringside seat as one of the most titanic attempts in history to realise freedom, equality and rationality turned into a terrible nightmare.

He understood that the Enlightenment needs to be aware of the complex and contradictory human matrix in which its projects are to be made real. And where else to find a list of what Enlighteners often forget than in the writings of their enemies? And so the paradox that Isaiah, a great friend of the Enlightenment, did more than anyone else to make the thought of its critics – even its bitter enemies, think of de Maistre – available to us.

Once they see the limitations of the Enlightenment, a lot of people have been tempted to go over to the Counter-Enlightenment. Indeed, in this age of absolute allegiances, it was often very hard not to go whole hog for one or the other. That's where Isaiah kept his head. He taught us that the best way to further the cause of the Enlightenment was to understand more fully what its critics have been saying. And this he did to no small degree.

The next thing we owe him is that he drew the lesson from all this. The problem with the unruffled boosters of the Enlightenment as well as its unreconcilable enemies is that they can't get their minds around the idea that a value may need its opposite not to become dangerous. For them, all good things cohere together, in one single consistent package. Perhaps the doctrine for which Isaiah will be mainly remembered is the denial of this too facile, Panglossian assumption. The things which we inescapably find good often conflict, sometimes tragically. The attempt to hide this from ourselves is not only an intellectual failing, it is also a source of catastrophically destructive action, as we try to dragoon reality into our narrow conceptual net. That was Isaiah's trenchant critique of certain theories of positive freedom, that they tried to pretend that freedom was compatible with a whole lot of other good things, by the simple expedient of including them in its definition.

But it is not just wishful thinking which tempts us to do this. There is something in the modern rationalism, so deeply anchored in philosophy, which pushes us to believe that all morality can be derived from a single source. Both Kant and the utilitarians believed this,

though their single criterion differed. The real plurality of value, and the potentially tragic conflicts this generates, was not allowed on to their conceptual screen.

Here we can appreciate the complex relation of Isaiah to academic philosophy, which was in a sense his native intellectual turf. After being one of the participants in the exciting new developments of the 1930s, Isaiah in a certain way left philosophy. He emigrated. That is, he called what he then went on to do something else, perhaps the history of ideas. But it went on being extremely relevant to academic philosophy, albeit in a negative way, because it challenged the unitary assumptions which hold so much moral philosophy in their grip. The moral thinking he studied in the authors he wrote about, that which he developed himself, couldn't find a place in the narrow structures of principles and deductions which defined the horizon of much academic moral philosophy. But since he had officially 'emigrated' the challenge could lie unnoticed.

I think Isaiah thought that philosophy had to be done within this horizon, and that's why he lost some of his original interest in it. I still hope this is not so, but here, as so often, Isaiah is probably being more realistic than I am.

So this man told us truths, important truths, which we had trouble hearing, because of our partisan commitments, or our too narrow understanding of reason. He told us about the moral complexity of our world, and the tragedy, the sadness of dashed hopes that this can occasion. But he also offered another kind of hope, that this world need not be intractable, if we could just hold on to the complexity, the paradox, hold together in sympathetic understanding the incommensurable moral goods which clash in our lives, and in the history we are living through.

And this is where we have to move beyond the content of the message to the timbre of the voice which carried it, and beneath the voice, the human being. There is another too neat philosophical dichotomy which distinguishes the logical content of a philosophy from its rhetorical clothing. But in moral thought the convincing power of an idea also comes, and rightly, from the quality of the human life it inspires. Isaiah not only taught us the importance of broad human sympathy, he lived this sympathy, he was this sympathy. He touched all of us, and that is why we were so moved by what he taught us, why we are all here today, and why his message will go on resonating for us and for those who come after us into a new century which will have more than ever need of his wisdom, understanding, and what Herder called *Humanität*.
