



## **More Explaining**

### **Isaiah Berlin on his own ideas**

This PDF is one of a series designed to assist scholars in their research on Isaiah Berlin, and the subjects in which he was interested.

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# More Explaining

## *Isaiah Berlin on His Own Ideas*

These letters and extracts are posted here in the belief that they may be useful to scholars who wish to clarify Berlin's ideas, even though room could not be found for them in the selection published in *Affirming: Letters 1975–1997*. In cases where another part of the relevant letter has been published, the page where that part begins is given at the head of the part posted here; and a few words from the published portion are supplied **[in brackets in red]** to show where the extra material provided here belongs in the text of the letter.

Letters to Beata Polanowska-Sygulska that appear in her joint work with Berlin, *Unfinished Dialogue* (2006), are not included.

Even the selection of letters that appears below is not exhaustive: we have chosen the clearest additional statements, those likely to be the most interesting to interpreters of Berlin's thought. There is naturally a good deal of overlap in his replies to enquirers, whose questions also often overlapped, and we have not sought to eliminate this here, but have omitted passages that seem to add little to better statements either in *Affirming* or in the letters below. Readers who wish to read every single letter of this kind that survives in Berlin's papers can do so at the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

Although some footnotes have been inserted, no attempt has been made to provide these letters with the full editorial apparatus that would have been supplied had they been selected for printed publication.

Henry Hardy  
Mark Pottle

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TO BHIKHU PAREKH

[1982]

Headington House

Dear Parekh,

Thank you ever so much for sending me the offprint of your article in the *British Journal of Political Studies*<sup>1</sup> – thank you indeed, and the more warmly, for taking an interest in my political ideas at all. As you know, one writes and speaks, and has no idea whether this means anything to people, or how much; I know, of course, what my critics think, from E. H. Carr to the admirable Sen and the less impressive Macpherson (who is nevertheless a gifted and honest man, in my opinion), MacIntyre, MacCallum and Bernard Crick, down to miserable hacks who give Marxism a bad name, like Arblaster, Jacoby and (the old-line Communist) Lewis – but you will never have heard of them, I expect. I feel like Douglas Fairbanks in one of the old films, standing on a table fending off many assailants with sharp rapiers from all sides – Catholics, conservatives, socialists, Hegelians, Oakeshottians, anti-Oakeshottians. Still, I miraculously survive. I am not the kind of Professor who has disciples: indeed I think I should be embarrassed if I had – even the worthy Gray, of Jesus College, Oxford, is not that, but a temperate critic, though he does not think too ill of me.

However, I say all this only to thank you for having been so generous and so fair. As you will see, I think there are some things which even you seem to me not to have got quite right – obviously I must have failed to express my views clearly enough, for I do not doubt either your perceptiveness or your good will.

Let me thank you, before I forget to do so, for your book on Karl Marx, which of course I shall read as soon as I have a moment of time – God knows, though I am technically retired, I do not appear to have more than half-an-hour for anything – but I am determined to finish this letter as it should be finished, namely with a list (I hope you will forgive me) of my reactions to your

<sup>1</sup> ‘The Political Thought of Sir Isaiah Berlin’, *British Journal of Political Science* 12 no. 2 (April 1982), 201–26. IB refers to the pagination of this article, which also appears as chapter 2 of Parekh’s *Contemporary Political Thinkers* (Oxford, 1982).

piece, successively, page by page and paragraph by paragraph, trivial as well as important, simply as the points occur to me in the course of reading. There is absolutely no need for you to retain this list – if you throw it away immediately, and give no further thought to it, I shall understand perfectly and expect no response from you. If, of course, you have some leisure and would like to write, I should, as you know, be happy to hear from you. So let it rest. Let me once again express my gratitude, and I hope you will forgive me for this long list.

*p. 203.* I do not say that ordinary men think in paradigms or models (in my sense): most men do not ask themselves or anyone else philosophical questions, e.g. ‘Why should one obey anyone else?’, or ‘What is sovereignty?’ – or justice or liberty. No doubt if they are thoughtful, with a philosophical bent, they do so, and so perhaps models and paradigms do come in: they certainly do with conscious thinkers. No doubt some current political theory seeps into ordinary men’s minds, but only seeps – it does not, I think, dominate or disturb their thoughts. If an ordinary man were asked ‘What is a State?’ he might mumble something about government or authority, but, on the whole, if you pressed him, would be mildly puzzled or confused. I don’t think a model would be very prominent, it would have to be dug for rather deeply, and even then nothing very definite could be found, perhaps three or four models superimposed on each other in some haphazard way. However, that, I daresay, is only a small point of social psychology.

*p. 204.* I do not think that the permanent features or categories are *logically* different from more transient characteristics. This seems to me a matter of degree. The differences between the more permanent and the less permanent concepts or ways or patterns in which we think are not what I would call logical – there is a gradual incline, as it were, a *glacis*.<sup>2</sup> The knowledge of these distinctions is founded on observation, ‘insight’, awareness of the less or more transient presuppositions of social life. Some, of course, are, in effect, permanent, and those do deserve the name of categories – categories of which it seems right to say that we literally cannot help using them, or nearly so. But if I am right (*p. 205*) to think that models tend to alter – indeed, can sometimes be altered by a thinker of genius – then they are not permanent. Thus,

<sup>2</sup> ‘Slope’.

for instance, the Aristotelian or medieval conceptions of social life and political order no longer worked for the post-Renaissance world. Teleological models declined sharply after the seventeenth-century; organic, mechanistic, aesthetic, statistical, field-of-force models fight for their lives today; and some did yesterday and the day before, in the nineteenth century. The degrees of ‘permanence’ are not logical differences: permanence is a *de facto* not a *de jure* concept.

*p. 205 (last para.)*. Hobbes does not seem to me to differ from Rousseau because of differences of categorical frameworks, as it were, but to a large degree because of their empirical judgement of men differed. Do men most of all seek security from violent death? Or, on the contrary, to obey God’s laws, or freedom from domination, or – like Bloomsbury – love and friendship and aesthetic enjoyment? Or, on the contrary, power or recognition by others or protection from boredom and inertia? Perhaps I overstress the contrast between empirical versus basic conceptions of man. On p. 206, para. 2, line 9, you attribute to me the ‘aim to develop [...] categories’; but if we cannot help using fixed categories as they are, what is there to develop? If these categories are permanent, they can only be ‘revealed’ (‘uncovered’ is more appropriate): if they are not permanent, then what is [it] that we can’t help?

*p. 206, para. 3*. ‘Only in a world where values collide’.<sup>3</sup> It would, I think, be more accurate to say ‘in which values cannot *prima facie* be seen to harmonise, or be organised in some systematic hierarchy’. Political philosophers *do*, after all, seek after that – I think it a will-o’-the-wisp: but one cannot say that there is no political philosophy unless this is perceived from the beginning. It is true that if the ideal of harmony is fulfilled, then all conflicts are about means: but it is difficult to say that this is the line taken by the political philosophies of the classical thinkers – they are concerned about problems of harmonisation or hierarchy of values rather than solely the adjustment of means, are they not?

<sup>3</sup> Parekh quotes IB here: ‘If we ask the Kantian question “In what kind of world is political philosophy [...] possible?” the answer must be “Only in a world where ends collide.”’ ‘Does Political Theory Still Exist?’, CC 149, CC2 195.

*p. 206, last line.* ‘Discord’ seems to me too strong; ‘divergence’ or ‘problems’ about the relationships of ultimate values is, I think, all I could be thought to mean.

*p. 207, line 1.* [‘great works in political philosophy have] almost invariably [appeared] in times of crisis’ – did I really say that? I expect I did somewhere, but it isn’t correct. Crossman, I remember, and I disagreed about that. He did think precisely that; but I objected that e.g. Aquinas, Hume, even Mill and Nietzsche, were not really obvious cases of it. If I did say it, it was characteristically rash of me: there is much truth in it, but not enough – do you not agree?

*p. 207, line 5.* I do not think political philosophers are obliged to develop a conception of man – it may underlie (and I believe that strongly) their political philosophies, and it is differences in this respect, ultimately empirical ones about man’s nature, that create differences between them. But they are surely not obliged to spell out their entire view of man’s nature; only of political life – and even that may be too ambitious. The structure or nature of political life is enough.

The rest of *p. 207* seems very good indeed to me; but *para. 2*, *line 7* – ‘men follow’? I think only ‘men can (or should) follow’. Otherwise there would be trouble.

*p. 208, para. 2, lines 6–7.* ‘Distinction between the human and non-human world’. Yes, indeed; I do not think that I say more than the distinction between our *knowledge* of the two, not the essence, not the thing itself. The real difference is not easy to formulate and is highly controversial, more so than our impression of it, even conviction, which is all I mean by knowledge here. Vico ‘conclusively demonstrated’ – this seems to me a bit too strong – ‘indicated’, ‘revealed’ would be quite sufficient, surely?

*p. 209, para. 2, line 2.* ‘The conflicts [between values, principles, human capacities and so on are the fundamental and inescapable feature of human life, and cannot in principle be eliminated]’: not all (this I should like to stress), not *all*, only *some*, if you see what I mean. This is important.

*p. 209, para. 3.* [‘A singer may lose his capacity to sing if he became acutely self-conscious, or was persuaded that his songs or his wish to sing had ugly psychological roots.’] This really is not my belief at all. Surely I have never said that a singer may stop if he discovers that his singing has ‘ugly psychological roots’. It is not

that that I am thinking of (I doubt, indeed, if it is true). He may stop, however, if the wound from which his art may have sprung is healed by self-knowledge. Certainly not that a scientist must despair at not being a poet or an athlete: there is no reason why these properties cannot be compatible; and even if they are not, this should not necessarily upset one or inhibit one's creative activity. Of course there may be inspiring delusions, the exposure of which may inhibit or divert the creative stream; of course one set of capacities may 'render a man incapable of developing others'. What I was thinking of was the healing of a wound from which art had flowed. If Kafka or Dostoevsky or Heine had gone through a thorough course of psychoanalysis and had become 'normal', and developed peaceful and happy human relationships, etc., would this not have affected their art, even diverted their creative abilities in some quite different direction, or weakened them altogether? I do not know, but I thought it might well be so.

In the next paragraph (4) you say that 'the conflicts between liberty and equality or between spontaneity and efficiency' are contingent, dependent on 'the prevailing form of social organisation'. I think this may be so, but am not at all sure: certainly I do not wish to assert it with any degree of conviction; I think the conflict between them lies deeper.

It is true (p. 210) that lack of resources may frustrate my wish to be a first-class doctor and a splendid athlete: but if it is only lack of resources, then perhaps this can be changed. Surely all this is much more contingent than the really ineliminable conflicts – say, the theme of Wagner's *Ring* – love versus the desire for power or love versus honour in his *Tristan*, or the theme of Sophocles' *Antigone*. There really is an ineliminable 'incompatibility' between, say, a society in which conflicts can be removed (by social action) and one in which they remain but which is preferable on some other ground. (Ferguson, for example, tended to believe that only conflict was a true stimulation to effective action – hence instinctive craving for e.g. blood sports and their attendant dangers, for a life of passionate competition versus a quiet life, in most societies. This cannot be removed by social action, and does seem to me not contingent in the same sense.) These cases don't seem to be 'on all fours' with one another. Nor do I say or believe (p. 210, para 2) that I necessarily want men's motives to be 'noble'.

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I repeat, conflicts seem to me to arise because the removal of a wound which was responsible for, say, Beethoven's art may kill it.

I am grateful to you for saying that you think I have established the reality of the conflict of values. It is a thing I most deeply believe, and do not find stressed in many other thinkers. But I do not believe, as I say, that *all* conflicts are of this kind and therefore ineliminable. The examples I give are, for the most part, not, I think, removable by social reform or revolution, not even the conflict between liberty and equality or spontaneity and efficiency. Do you really believe that they are? Spontaneous efficiency, calculation and non-calculation, really do seem to me to be conceptually, and not empirically, impossible (I mean by efficiency careful planning etc.).

*pp. 210–11.* The incoherence of the notion of the ideal man and the ideal society: thank you very much for noting this – people on the whole do not take kindly to this anti-utopian idea, as you may imagine.

*p. 211, line 6.* Each society 'represents a uniquely wonderful exfoliation of the human spirit'. Not necessarily: one is perfectly well allowed to condemn Nazi, Soviet or Aztec culture – to allow for a plurality of civilisations is certainly not to forbid one to praise or condemn on the grounds of the values that are common to all men, the denial of which would make communication impossible. This is 'subjective', if you like – the values are not 'out there' – but so all-embracing that it seems to me to be what, on the whole, we find we mean by 'objective'. This is not simply to say that what all men believe is objectively true *eo ipso* – clearly, if all men believed that the earth was flat, it would not make it so. But a man's belief that the earth is flat is not unintelligible to one who believes that it is round, only mistaken. But there are value judgements the denial of which does cause one to think that the denier is not just eccentric or wrong, but mad – literally not communicable with. I do not at present see how one can get nearer to objectivity of values than that. Let me add that what you say on pp. 210–12 seems very fair and just to me.

*p. 213, last para., lines 3–4.* 'He must be taken to mean that certain things are values in themselves and independent[ly] of human choices.' This is not my view. I think that an ultimate value is something that a man *could* choose (as an end in itself), i.e. something which, by imaginatively placing myself in his position, I



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could conceive as the kind of value which men could pursue and still be fully human – members of a society with which I could (across time or space) communicate, i.e. understand and be understood by. Consequently, such ends must be limited in kind and number: they cannot be just anything; the nature of a human being, however various, limits possible ends. They are not independent of human choices; only if chosen are they ends. They must be choosable by human beings, and not all imaginable goals are. The Nazis, at times thought mad, were in my opinion not so – their choices, founded on false empirical premisses about sub-men and the like, were perfectly intelligible, however odious to you and me; but if I find creatures whose sole end in life is to destroy everything blue, without any justifying myth or code or faith or expectation of pleasure or avoidance of pain, [n]or in conformity to some imagined order of the universe – then they are not human for me.

*p.* 214. Very good indeed, very.

*p.* 215, *lines* 1–3. I don't believe in Disraeli's 'mysticism' much. His self-deception, yes – 'romantic self-deception', perhaps. On Marx, did I say 'facile'? Perhaps it was. When I was writing about him I certainly did not think this, but you may be right.

*pp.* 216–17. Absolutely excellent. (Forgive me for this patronising, school-masterly award of marks – it is just meant to convey my gratitude and satisfaction at being got right, which is a rare and wonderful feeling.)

*p.* 218, *para.* 3. This is not quite right. I do not argue that limitations imposed by nature are not restrictions of liberty. In some sense of course they are. But I was speaking specifically only of *political* liberty, and that I do believe can be said to be affected only when there is interference by others – this is a very central point for me. The only restrictions that are, in effect, encroachments on political liberty are indeed, according to me, man-made. I am not sure that you are right to attribute to me the view that 'there is no general agreement about what counts as restriction'. Why shouldn't there be? Given societies *may* agree in their general sociological conceptions, and in that case they would agree about what counts as restriction of political liberty. If one really believed that the laws of supply and demand were objective, iron laws, as Marx accused bourgeois economists of believing, then, according to these people, they could not be held to restrict

liberty (and I suppose some Liberals did think this): what counts as restricting liberty depends on one's theory of what constitutes social activity and its direct or indirect consequences. What counts for Marxists doesn't count for Manchester Liberals or theocrats. Isn't that right?

*p. 219, end of para. 1.* Oh dear, I thought I was perfectly clear, but evidently I was not. If my poverty is the result of the capitalist system, or my money is confiscated for, say, political or legal reasons, then I am certainly being interfered with. There is, no doubt, a fine line between poverty and, say, illiteracy: the latter may well be due to educational inequalities, due, in their turn, to the poverty of the uneducated, which could have been prevented under some alternative social organisation. But it can be argued that, though I could have been richer, or better educated, it would have been only at the expense of some other values, say, the health or standard of living or, indeed, education of too many others – or even of the risk of the misuse of the material means or goods bestowed on me. Then, although I am being deprived of liberty, general liberty is nevertheless not being diminished, and there is justification for this kind of deprivation or 'interference'. Para. 2 surely makes it clear that only political liberty is relevant here. You say that 'internal' – psychological – obstacles 'seem to give Berlin difficulty'. The issue is one of moral psychology or metaphysics; but I make it clear that if they can be shown to be products of social arrangements, then the obstacles to liberty do turn out to be political – so that I see no difficulty. If the obstacles are thought to spring from some other than political or social causes, then they are not political and not relevant to my general thesis.

*p. 220, para. 3, line 7.* '[To be human is to possess certain fundamental features, including the basic capacities to give and appreciate reasons for one's actions, and to distinguish between fact and fiction and between the moral and the amoral. A being lacking these basic capacities lacks what constitutes man's humanity, and is] simply not human.' If I say this, and I expect I do (I have deliberately not looked at my own texts, so as to avoid quibbling, as all criticised authors are liable to do; I would rather discuss the issue as it seems to me *now*), then possibly I go too far: mad, yes; diminished responsibility, yes; but not human? At some point I would be forced to say this, yes: but the line between crazy, mad, and not human is a fine one: how mad to cease to be human?

Legally, morally, medically etc.? There is a philosophical problem of identity here, of course: if I go stark staring mad, am I still the same self? If my brain is cut into two by a surgeon, to cure me of epilepsy, am I one person or two, and which is responsible for what 'I' did yesterday? And so on. All this is not, I suppose, relevant here. Fortunately.

*pp.* 221–2. Quite splendid.

*p.* 223. Here you criticise me for expounding not real pluralism, but 'several absolutes' with 'no dialogue between competing values', 'not really pluralism but plural monism', 'closed and monadic islands, each dominated by its own absolute'. And from this you deduce that I believe that we should 'respect' a rival system which thinks it right to kill people in order to diminish the sins they might otherwise commit. But I do not believe this at all. If I am to judge it, I must make sure I *understand* it as another, even though an exceedingly alien, world: but I can condemn it unreservedly in terms of my absolute values as much as I want. All I demand is that the values of the defenders of killing must be such as *can* be followed by people whom I perceive as being men – *frères, semblables*; that is, that these values must be such that I could at least *conceive* myself as seeing their point if, for example, I accepted the premisses of the religious maniacs; if I cannot do this, then the values are genuinely outside my ken. But if I can conceive myself as attracted, or at least can understand how someone might be attracted, to them and choose them, I can still denounce them and reject them in terms of my own absolute values, which I assume others, who disagree with me, will understand even if they do reject or denounce them in their turn. I do hope so. It is the heart of my non-relativistic pluralism.

*p.* 224. 'Radical pluralism' is not a doctrine I accept. Intelligibility is for me a *sine qua non* – no intelligibility, no humanity. To say that there is a plurality of values is not subjectivism, nor a collection of monadic bubbles between which there can be no communication, but the entire constellation of various and incompatible human values, which could be argued about and accepted, rejected, painfully weighed and chosen by reference to some systematic conception of life, or scales socially formed – and yet remain 'objective'. In other words, I can conceive of absolute values which are not chosen by me, but they are not there in some objective Platonic heaven, to be chosen or

not chosen: they possess reality only if they have been chosen or not chosen; they possess reality only if they have been chosen or at least imagined as capable of being chosen. I am not an objective realist about values. I have no idea what it would feel like to be one, but I vaguely envy those who are; things are much easier for them, I suspect, though what they believe has become obscure to me. A heaven studded with star-like values independent of human consciousness? As G. E. Moore once thought? Odd.

p. 224, para. 2. As for the ‘socialisation’ of values, it may well be that I am nine-tenths a socially formed being, but there still are *hommes révoltés*, revolutionary thinkers, Nietzsches, Sartres, who set sail on the Oakeshottian sea, guided by values not obviously all derived from a combination of social factors (to say that reaction to these factors is itself a social consequence of them is, I think, begging the question). There *is* originality of vision; individual rebellions need not be totally reducible to social causes even if 99 per cent are so.

I have denied my alleged Platonism already, and must now say not only that Hitler’s claim that his purposes are sacred, ultimate and beyond criticism, etc. can be denied, but that this can be done for all values whatever, however ultimate. The idea that values are beyond criticism, which has been held (e.g. Roy Harrod in a famous essay on Utilitarianism), is not my view. I am free to condemn the views of admired saints if they offend my conception of human nature, or the form of life I (and, in the majority of cases, my society, or, in Schlick’s phrase, *Kulturkreis*) live by. Tolstoy denounced the world of nineteenth-century Western culture; my colleague Anthony Quinton thinks Tolstoy’s view is odious, as bad as Milton’s. To ask which is objectively right is, according to my view at least, a misconceived question: each of these outlooks is a possible human outlook and I understand more about society and myself if I understand what it is that attracts men to systems or values not – indeed, incompatible with – my own; but this does not preclude me from thinking some of them detestable, or committing myself to fighting them, if need be at the risk of death. The only criterion in terms of which I can ‘objectively’ denounce them as bad is if they offend against that (basic) set of values which men must hold in common if they are to form a society, to intercommunicate. If Hitler sins against that code, then I am not obliged to seek to imagine what it would be

like to ‘empathise’ with such outlooks, for that I literally cannot do – any more than (if this were imaginable) with the values of raving lunatics or inhabitants of other worlds, which *ex hypothesi* we cannot describe in terms of our own. The issue seem to me a good deal less simple than on your p. 224.

*p. 224, last para.* Where you speak of non-political freedom: ‘moral’, ‘spiritual’, ‘economic’ freedoms are indeed distinct from social or political ones, and the conflicts between them are not my topic – my topic, I say again, is only political freedom.

*p. 225, para. 2.* This, I think, is misconceived. I never say that liberty applies only to the isolated individual; to shut doors, e.g. to association with others, both political and social, to activity with them, is of course a deprivation of political liberty – all interference is at once a diminution of the liberty of the interfered and an increase of the liberty of the interferer. Benjamin Constant, to whom I refer, thinks mainly of the demarcated area of non-interference sacred to private life; he contrasts this with, say, the classical Greek notion of liberty as privilege of unlimited interference by all persons with each other. The two conceptions collide – an uneasy compromise between them had to be drawn. This is what I say and think. I do not think that you have interpreted this correctly.

*p. 225, last para.* You accuse me of conceiving of a pre-social, fully free man, who gives up his ‘natural’ liberty to make possible social existence – which you take to be the central idea of the social contract. No, I do not believe that either, and if I have given that impression I am to blame for putting it badly. Of course man is a social product, but liberty remains an area of unimpeded action wherever human characteristics are created and developed. The choices, even within a man’s mind, may be socially constituted: but his often agonised choice of X in preference to Y, or even a ‘trade-off’ of X to Y + 2, is in a clear sense his own: and can be very lonely.

*p. 226.* Surely, if I am prevented from committing rape, murder etc., I do suffer a loss of liberty? But it is right that I should accept this loss of liberty, or have it thrust upon me, because these actions deny too many other liberties, and crush too many other values that I and my society or *Kulturkreis* wish to preserve. But the fact that I suffer loss of liberty seems to me undeniable – it is a loss to be imposed and recommended; it is the price paid for the

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minimum degree of security and preservation of other values. You ask, in effect, whence do I derive this right (the right to rape) – not, you say, from society, so it must be from nature. This seems to me a false question: I do not derive it at all – I am a chooser (I choose unless prevented), my power of choice is not conferred by society or anyone else, it is a basic part of my nature as a human creature, like my effort to keep alive, my capacity for discrimination. I do indeed believe that all coercion is undesirable. I also believe that the prevention of rape, murder etc. is desirable. Thus I believe all infliction of pain is bad, but that the infliction of it on evildoers is better than letting them go scot-free. Freedom for murders, child-torturers, oppressors and destroyers of every kind is literally infinitely more evil than the liberty advocated by, say, anarchists, Byronic Satanists, etc. However, it does not follow that coercion is not an evil at all, however minute in comparison with its alternatives. Nothing that I have said implies that liberty, of *whatever* kind, is *always* preferable in comparison with other values. I do not, however, believe that the context dominates everything, that one can flatly lay down what is good or bad in specific cases without considering how far this is consistent with the constellation of values that formed one's moral and political and aesthetic outlook.

As for the thesis that there is no liberty, only liberties – I do not agree with it. There is a certain core: at least in those ideas (or even expressions), whatever their transformations, which recur in epoch after epoch, in society after society. 'Happiness', 'pleasure', 'pain' – not simply happinesses, pleasures, pains: it seems to me that there are such 'core' expressions and that they are empirically identifiable, that this is not a false ontology. You say that to ask whether liberty in general is good is like asking whether 'red' is good in general – it all depends on the context, on the social circumstances, and so on. I do not accept this parallel – deprivation of liberty seems to me an interfered-with choice, not some choices only; to stop a man from choosing 'diminishes' him, however socially bad the choices are likely to be. Of course you stop him if it is socially necessary, just as you are entitled to frustrate a man's happiness if it consists solely in gloating on the torments of others, or if his knowledge is likely to lead to unspeakable consequences. The justification of all action depends on contexts. But if values could be reduced to the contexts which

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alone gave them significance – if this were literally true – words like ‘freedom’ or ‘happiness’ would simply become homonyms; there would not even be a family resemblance between them, let alone the common core in which I still believe.

You do seem to me to drive your perfectly reasonable caveat about contexts too far, *ad absurdum* as it seems to me. I don’t believe that you actually disagree. Of course, if someone says ‘I am for liberty’ you have a right to say ‘Exactly what kind of liberty are you referring to? Political? Of individuals? Of groups? Of societies? Of nations? Facing what kinds of dangers? Against what kind of enemies? Or is it economic freedom you are thinking of, or social, or spiritual, or intellectual? Outer? Inner? Freedom from? Freedom to? To be free with? Like the Christian Book of Common Prayer, “In whose service is perfect freedom”? Or the Biblical “Ye shall know, and the knowledge shall set ye free”? From what? Idolatry? Or Hegel’s freedom *bey sich selbst seyn*?’ You can indeed ask all this, but freedom is not thereby rendered a mere homonym with a purely etymological or sociological or genetic explanation; at the very least it is a pointer – if not a name, a pointer – to a certain something, to a goal, however multi-faceted, which may not be definable, or [sc. but?] which is known to all, or most, men. It is not a mere loose concatenation of vaguely conceived, wholly disparate notions. This is particularly true of political freedom – those who have fought for or against it have seldom been unaware of the point of its existence or the reality of its absence. If we were to follow the line of your last paragraph, the thing would dissolve into a cluster of meanings without a centre. I do not for a moment believe that this is what you wish to say. (Still, if you do, you do.) Some followers of Wittgenstein would support you, some anthropologists would – I may be the last defender of Kant’s, William James’s, Herzen’s, Sartre’s, Bernard Williams’s pluralist world. So be it.

How disgracefully rhetorical all this has suddenly become. Do forgive me, and thank you again very much indeed.

Yours ever,

Isaiah Berlin

[...]

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TO BHIKHU PAREKH

14 January 1983

Headington House

Dear Bhikhu (if I may, and you must reciprocate),

Thank you ever so much for your letter. I won't bother you by going into elaborate detail. Values: they are not 'given' or 'intuited', I agree. I do not think something becomes a value because it is deliberately chosen: it is a value because it is one finite, limited horizon of choosable ends, which a human being chooses or is able to choose, not only by consciously pursuing it or seeking to realise it, but also by feelings of, say, delight or horror or hope or fear, etc. when faced with a vision of human behaviour or experience in the past, present, future, in imagination, dream, etc., which is how values, for the most part, 'operate'. Something, in my view, is a human value when the intentions or motives of those who pursue them are intelligible to other human beings, at least in principle; when others can understand that, in similar circumstances, if the same possibilities were open, they can conceive themselves as pursuing the ends in question without ceasing to be the kind of persons that they are, with, in a wide sense, the kind of outlook that they have. Something like that. All this is somewhat Humean, but it is roughly what I believe, although I am sure I haven't got it quite right or been entirely clear. Murdering all men in sight is not something which I could conceive of being an end to which I am committed; but, given the kind of circumstances in which the berserk murderer was in fact placed, unless I myself am deranged, I must think him to be so. All these things rest on a kind of analogy – *Denkexperiment* – without which no communication is ultimately possible – that is the social context, of which you speak, in which these things must operate. Herbert Hart's minimum content of natural law is relevant to this: unless those rules and values operate without which a society cannot survive, the very notion of the pursuit of values, their objective or subjective status, etc., become unintelligible. If this is a kind of subjectivism, then I am guilty of it, but it seems to me objective enough against real egocentricity, subjectivism, etc. My preferences about treating men are binding on others because I must take them to be the kind of persons whose relationships to



me and to others are of a kind that they could not be unless such preferences were binding. If they are different from this, then, according to the degree of difference, the 'preferences' are less binding – diminished responsibility, etc. This is the same thing over again. Yes, it has something to do with a shared way of life; of course, other ways of life (untouchability, slavery, etc.) could be founded on values similar to mine, but being often founded on empirically false beliefs (like the Nazi view about sub-men, that the Jews were such, and poisoned society systematically, etc.). If it can be shown that beliefs and acts do not follow merely from invalid empirical beliefs, or involve a very different view of the world from my own, then I am liable to condemn such beliefs and acts as not so much wicked or abominable as unintelligible, in extreme cases mad, not human; and I have to protect myself or my society against them as I would against dangerous animals, not human beings moved by beliefs to which I can find analogy in my own experience. All these things are of course a matter of kind and degree – when do we say wicked, when do we say inhuman, etc. But in principle I think this is how it goes. Is this inadequate? It may be.

Now about liberty and choice. I do indeed think that the capacity for choosing is a *sine qua non* for men; that men who are prevented from choice are prevented from acting in a human manner. Of course all choice is choice of something. And the content of the choice, of course is crucially important. But simply to be a chooser – to be *able* to choose and not to be chosen for, to be able to go to the bad in one's own way, rather than be conditioned towards the good (whatever it may be) by the efforts of others (as the eighteenth-century Encyclopaedists seemed to hold) – seems to me paramount, as belonging to the essence of being a man. Kant makes this very plain in that essay on 'What is Civilisation?', his great attack on paternalism. Not to be able to choose, not to be able to be responsible, is to be de-humanised. To choose what is evil is to behave as a moral agent. Not to be able to choose at all is to cease to be one. being driven in a direction, however desirable, is to be like a child or an animal. What I hold most strongly is that it is the act of choice, not what is chosen – that is central to man's humanity. I really do mean that. Surely that is self-evident. Do you really disagree?

## MORE EXPLAINING

Someone drew my attention to a review of your book, by somebody called Ronald Beiner, on the THES of 26 November last: very captious tiresome and wrong. You were absolutely right to choose Marcuse – he is at least clear, highly influential and extremely intelligent, even if I flatly disagree with him – rather than poor old Adorno, whom I knew well, and liked as a man, but he produced endless clouds of black smoke in place of ideas – he was rather better on music – his used to be a name to drop, but is in fact a cant name by now; I am quite clear about that. Habermas is more serious, but also exceedingly obscure, and requiring a great deal of hermeneutic treatment – but at least genuine, in a muddled, distorted, what the French call *fumiste*, sort of way. I wish to say nothing about Popper's importance vis-a-vis Rawls, but Rawls did not define *liberalism*, but social democracy – nobody who has read his book with any attention could see him as a liberal – he is in fact a moderate socialist, and his book is that of one. I object very strongly to being described as an 'anti-rationalist'. Whatever one's view of Oakeshott – I know you think very well of him – my ideas are very different from his, as my style is – he is a very seductive writer, who has had a great and wide influence; but I am not anti-rationalist in his sense, and I do not think you make me out to be so – at least, I hope not. I am interested in anti-rationalists because I think they have discovered important chinks in the rationalist armour; I think that the scientific rationalism of the eighteenth century and part of the nineteenth is certainly imaginatively inferior to – contains less insight than – constructions of the romantics, at least of some of them; these people deserve to be taken seriously because they have deeply affected our own outlook, whether we be rationalists or not. But I strenuously object to being called anti-rationalist – whatever reason can do it should do, in my opinion; I do not think that it misleads, only that it is sometimes impotent where power is attributed to it. I am, I suppose a Humean, which I do not feel ashamed of. I suppose Oakeshott in a sense is one too, but we are very, very different. I also think it is grossly unfair to blame you for providing a textbook: to write about thinkers as you do is one way to philosophise – all great philosophers developed their philosophies in the course of expounding and criticising other people's thought – even Plato did that. Hobbes is intelligible only in contrast to scholastic morality – or at least the Christian outlook – he is opposed to; there are

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echoes of Machiavelli everywhere. Locke thinks about Filmer or Hobbes: there is no Kant without the French Encyclopaedists, against whom his entire morality is systematically directed. All these thinkers cannon off each other; I do not know any genuine philosopher who is genuinely on his own – some pretend they are, but that is usually an illusion.

I thought of writing a letter to the THES to say some of this, but on the whole I don't believe in answering reviewers unless the provocation is extreme or the facts are falsely stated. If you did it, I should, of course, be delighted; but I shall not blame you if you don't – I should understand your motive for not doing so all too well – that is what I call an objective value, whether or not it is realised! There is a case for letting idiot reviewers remain in limbo – if they repent in time they may still go on to some critical heaven (I should not care to be there).

Yours ever,  
Isaiah

TO HENRY S. RICHARDSON

20 April 1988

[L4 343]

**[I don't know whether I am making myself clear, I only hope so.]**

[...] 'Rightness of conduct independent of any political conception of the good life'. How can this be? I know what this means. I know what Kant says. I know that rightness is divided by him from goodness, etc. But why is this true, why is 'rightness' (however one understands that concept) not simply another end among ends? Why is duty, obligation, etc., not something which can conflict with the pursuit of like, liberty, happiness, with generosity, with self-realisation, with the pursuit of artistic creation, etc., etc? You quote Nagel. I am not sure that I understand this – the difference between *ergon*, the timeless expression of what it is to be human (Aristotle?) versus wider and deeper shared beliefs about what it is to be human (*endoxa*) – which is my view? I think the first. I have no idea.

p. 15. Mill: you say his view of liberty is derived from his utilitarianism. I disagree. The ‘permanent and progressive interests of mankind’ is a wonderful phrase, but what are these interests? Can they clash with individual or sectional interests or purposes? I know that Richard Wollheim thinks that Mill’s passion for individualism, liberty, self-expression, the rights to eccentricity – against the pressure of conventional opinion – is ultimately derived from his utilitarianism. But I do not see that. I think for Mill it was an independent end. I think his preaching against the confined and cribbed condition of an individual, or the hideous bullying of public opinion, is not simply pointing out that this diminishes the happiness of people, or their progress towards it; but is because they are attacks on basic needs of human beings as such, whether or not their satisfaction makes them happy. If society persecutes an artist for what it believes to be dangerous or immoral activities, his defence is not the pursuit of happiness – the motive for creating works of art is to create them, not some sort of happy condition which their creation results in.

[...] You speak of the fact that I am responsible for stressing conflicting conceptions of the good held by different individuals in a society. If I have given that impression, then perhaps I have exaggerated. Broadly speaking the values held by members of a given society, or even by societies taken historically over a wide range of time and space, do not differ all that much. Even the Nazis are simply a pathological or violently distorted form of aggressive nationalism, biological mysticism, etc., etc., less hideous forms of which are common enough certainly in Western history, and not all that different in Japan, or among Mongols. No doubt the ideals of the Ayatollah are very different from those of members of the Century Club – I don’t wish to minimise the vast chasms that lie between. But the real problem is the conflicts of values within a society which shares common values, or within the individual himself. That is where, at times, when there is no solution, one has to commit oneself, or plump in some existential fashion – at least according to me. Such conflicts are of course quite different in kind from two rulers, both of whom wish to possess Milan, or any other situation where the values are common enough to all the persons of groups involved, and conflict occurs from motives which are recognised as normal by the conflicting parties, as e.g. in civil wars, etc. But in the end – God v. Mammon

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– I think one does have to plump. As long as argument can in principle occur, common values are certainly presupposed.

**[[...] Yes, I do not deny it, I do prefer variety [...] it is simply a conflict, not tragic.]**

[...] How to combine plural values, etc. Oddly enough, despite the reference to him which you refer to, Weber did not in fact influence me, although it might be thought that he did – because I read him some time after I had completed this lecture. Of course I was delighted to discover a certain congruence of views.

[...] I agree with you. We certainly cannot in practice divide means from ends in a merely mechanical fashion. A long time ago Lassalle said that different means lead to different ends, i.e. modify the ends, and are therefore of cardinal importance. Yes, we try to adjust the range to modify (as Burke said, an even longer time ago) – Rawls's interweaving of Liberty, equality and fraternity is an attempt to avoid the collision of the 'raw' values that you attribute to Weber and to me. All this I agree with.

**[[...] 'Civil conversations' of course take place [...]]**

TO LARS ROAR LANGSLET

2 January 1991

*Answers to interview questions*

6. In your essay 'La théorie politique existe-t-elle?' (1961)<sup>4</sup> the question is asked whether political theory is dying, the principal symptom being 'that no commanding work of political philosophy has appeared in the twentieth century'. How would you answer your own question today? Has any such work of 'commanding' force appeared – and why/why not?

[...] I have no answer to this: who can tell how or why genius is born in one age and not in another? Why have the Germans produced writers of genius between 1770 and 1830 and fewer after

<sup>4</sup> *Revue française de science politique* 11 (1961), 309–37; repr. in English as 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?' in Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman (eds), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, 2nd Series (Oxford, 1962), CC and PSM. 'His answer is extremely *nuancé* but definitely hopeful': [A. H. Hanson,] TLS, 3 May 1963, 318.

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that? Why have great novelists been born in Russia, in England, in France, but fewer in Germany, Italy or the USA? I do not believe that these questions can be answered; and those who seek to explain this seem to me very unconvincing. Who can give a convincing explanation of why the Russian Revolution occurred? Not everything is knowable!

8. How should one explain the striking co-existence in our time of such sophisticated currents of philosophic thought with the rise (and fall) of crude totalitarianism, demanding absolute allegiance towards a fixed set of doctrines, and exerting total control of what people were to think and believe?

[...] I do not know how far any philosophers have had a decisive influence on social or political life. Not much, I should say. Ideologies, of course, have. Marxism has had vast influence, if you call that a philosophy; so have the views of some of the French Enlightenment, but in an exaggerated and often perverted form. Usually [this influence has] been due to greatly oversimplified views of men and history. I do not think that real philosophy, even at its subtlest and deepest, has managed to cure men of searching for cruder, simple, global solutions, with no attention to the complex natures of men, and these have done a good deal of harm.

9. Already in a lecture in 1959 (Vienna) you observed that ‘the forces that make for stability and reason are beginning to reassert themselves’ – signs of a return ‘to the habits, traditions, above all the common notion of good and evil, which reunites us to our Greek and Hebrew and Christian and humanist past’. How would you reformulate this observation after the events of 1989 and 1990?

13. Has your prognosis for the liberal values you advocate become more optimistic after the decline and fall of the Marxist-Leninist hegemony in Eastern and Central Europe? [...]

[...] I would say that the events of 1989–90 of course lead, as you suggest, to the reassertion of the forces that make for toleration and decency – I am not sure about stability or reason. In spite of all the violent upheavals which perhaps Eastern Europe may still undergo, these recent events seem to me to have done more to

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contribute to a sane and decent world than could have been hoped for during most of this century.

10. You have a profound insight into the history of Russian thought and culture. How would you describe the contrast between Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov in terms of the old diversion between Slavophiles and ‘Westerners’ (*Zapadniki*)? Are they both ‘hedgehogs’?

[...] Sakharov is a true Russian liberal or radical; he is the voice of the Westerners, the voice of Alexander Herzen speaking now – honourable, civilised, generous, liberal, egalitarian, democratic and dedicated to the discovery of truth and justice. Solzhenitsyn is a very different matter. You speak of Slavophilism: I do not think he can be described as a Slavophile. He does not take much interest, as they did, in Serbs or Bulgarians or Czechs or Slovaks or other Slavic tribes. He is far more like those Old Believers of the late seventeenth century who rejected the reforms of the Orthodox Church, and believed that Satan – i.e. Peter the Great – was upon the throne, and refused to bear arms or pay taxes, and occasionally burnt themselves when Peter’s soldiers came to round them up. I think Solzhenitsyn is much more like that – deeply clerical, deeply nationalistic – brave, sincere, energetic, with nobility of character; but a liberal he is not, nor, I should guess, a democrat; nor does he take much interest in the attainments of Western civilisation, all of which were dear to Sakharov.

11. On the last page of your book on Marx [...] you describe his work as ‘the most powerful among the intellectual forces which are today permanently transforming the way in which men act and think’.<sup>5</sup> How would you characterise his impact now? What in Marx will remain alive?

[...] The main heritage of Marx, which I regard as valuable, is his emphasis on the influence of technology on culture, for good or evil. The rest – for example, his view that it is capitalism and class war and their culture that are the greatest obstacles to human freedom, or his social and economic prophecies – have not, I think, on the whole, been verified by time. But the method, the importance [of] technological change and its influence on human history, and the vision (to some extent self-fulfilling) that the

<sup>5</sup> KM5 266.

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numerous poor would one day rise against the fewer rich – [these], I think, [have] proved valid.

TO CLAUDE GALIPEAU

5 January 1991

[...] Israel: certainly I wish to say that those who don't wish to live in a 'free, integrated society' should be free to do so; and certainly not all men wish to do so – I am not sure that I do myself, by this time in my life. Plenty of people choose to remain as *métèques* – Italians in France, Germans in England, members of minorities everywhere. If they choose to accept the disadvantages of such a condition (together with certain liberties, e.g. freedom from the need to vote or take to heart the national anxieties of their host country), then they will continue to do so, and why not? And they may even prefer an inferior status, or discrimination – however unjust – to the disadvantage of belonging to a society of which they will be full members. A liberal society is obliged not only to put up with minorities, foreigners etc., but to give them opportunities realising their own cultural needs and tastes.

When you ask what is an integrated society, that is much more difficult to answer. You must know that there was a movement called *integralisme* in, for example, France, which was an extreme nationalist party – that of Maurras and the Croix-de-Feu etc., which believed in France for the French and did not wish to give public position or any sort of possibilities of influence to persons they regarded as not of pure French birth. That was an extreme position, and akin to Fascism in certain important respects. But I do not think that is what is normally meant by 'integrated'. What I mean by it is that there is, in a given society, enough (do not ask me how much – that is not answerable in precise terms) common sentiment of belonging, which in its turn is fed by common memories, acceptance of general customs, ways of life, habits, the rule of a universal legal system binding on everyone, and as a rule a common language, which holds for a sufficient portion of the population to give a very definite national character to a given society. Of course this does not mean that minorities should not be accorded the right to individual cultural existence, development and fulfilment of cultural – usually linguistic – needs. A completely



integrated society would, I suppose, be one without minorities, but there are not many such – Portugal, perhaps? Canada is a perfectly good example of a reasonably integrated society, where there is certainly common law and enough common feeling, memories, habits etc., to create an accepted common way of life; but of course, there is tension, inevitably, between those who do not accept much of this – Quebecois, Indians, Ukrainians. In such places there will always be a certain degree of tension, sometimes rising to friction, between those who want to have a total common culture, e.g. involving one official language only, a common educational system, etc., and those who wish to preserve and develop regional, local, ethnic etc. cultures of their own, in touch with and part and parcel of the general culture of the country but nevertheless distinguished from it by very definite characteristics – those who want a total integrated culture will resist this, those who feel persecuted by this will push outwards and display all kinds of signs of independence, sometimes amounting to aggressive self-determination as in Canada, in Belgium, in Wales, Scotland and, most acutely, in truly divided countries like Ireland and Israel. Italy is a genuinely integrated country; Spain, with its Basque troubles, not really. And so on. Nationalism and religion can become tyrannical and combination usually distorts both.

‘Free’ is another matter. Freedom means two things: (1) independence of any form of outside rule, i.e. foreign domination; and (2) the institutions either of a liberal democracy or, if the great majority so prefer it, some other, perhaps to you and me highly unattractive, political structure. For all I know – and I don’t know much – Iraq, which is anything but liberal or democratic, leads a form of life which is to the total satisfaction of the great majority of all its citizens, in which case it could be regarded as a freely accepted way of life. So there is a certain ambiguity about the word ‘free’, as you well know. I intend the idea of ‘free’ and integrated to be descriptive. But of course, if you ask my views about what I prefer, then certainly prescriptive.

This, I think, answers your next question, about individual liberty versus social integration or ethnic pluralism. Negative liberty is of course often impeded by the needs of an integrated social texture – impeded less or more depending on the degree to which individuals feel ‘realised’, do not feel frustrated, prevented from being and doing what they want by the texture. The

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fundamental sense of ‘integrated’ is, of course, a case of positive liberty, where both self-government in a country and the authority of its institutions are emphasised, if need be at the expense of individual tastes and ambitions, even if they conflict with the negative liberty of some, maybe many, of its citizens. All men need to ‘belong’ (see Herder), and they want to be able to secede and live non-religious, non-national, highly individual lives. Room in any genuine liberal society must be found for both. Most people crave solidarity and cannot live with it; some it suffocates. Decent societies must cater for both.

The most obvious example of the emphasis on ‘positive’ liberty to the exclusion of individual deviations is that of societies or Churches or parties – any groups – whose way of life rest first on the belief that everything in the world is (or if not, at least human beings are) created to fulfil certain purposes (so created by God or nature), and secondly on the conviction – theological or metaphysical as the case may be – that this fulfilment can only occur collectively, i.e. by identifying oneself with the purpose of the entire group, itself created to attain (transcendentally given) goals; and that any tendency to detach oneself from the natural, or religious, or class-determined etc. ‘whole’ is a symptom of decadence, abnormality, anti-social direction, at the very least of lack of self-understanding, of knowing what man’s purpose on earth, and therefore the direction of history, is (conceived sometimes as a drama with many acts, but leading to total fulfilment, as by Hegel or Marx). If one believes this, or behaves consciously or unconsciously as if this is the case, then individual choice – ‘negative’ liberty etc. – must be severely delimited by the central goals of the ‘whole’: the orchestra, the team, the group, nation, Church, class etc. which alone tell one what one should do and be if one is to lead the life one is made for. The right to a good many individual freedoms depends on denial of such an overriding purpose.

I am not sure that this is the answer, as I said above, but I hope it is clear enough. Still, under pressure from people like you I may change or modify or sharpen this view. [...]

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TO HENRY HARDY

2 April 1991

[L4 410]

**[I am not sure.]**

Now, about 'relative'. I suppose that was a quotation from Schumpeter – which I could not alter. But I agree, it is not what I would say. Nor would I say 'optional validity'. I think what I would have to say is something like 'even though it is not eternal or universal'. I think that's all that Schumpeter meant: not that it is relative to me, but that it may pass, that in two hundred years' time it may not seem worth dying for, as we do not think that some forms of martyrdom were worth undergoing even if we respect them and yet perhaps reject them – like the Old Believers in Russia, who burnt themselves, or terrorism in our time everywhere. How much do I respect Palestinian, Irish, Basque terrorists? I hate them all; but I cannot deny that if they risk their lives one owes them a certain degree of extremely reluctant respect because one puts a value on integrity, however misconceived. [...]

TO SIGNORA MERLO

9 April 1991

[...] When I define man as free, rational etc. I do not think that I say that simply because that is what men have been like throughout history. It is much more that I think that that is how human beings have been conceived of by those who have thought about what they were – not only philosophers and theologians, but any thoughtful persons who reflected on what human relations are, and human needs and human purposes. Free, certainly, in the sense that there must be some minimum degree of not being controlled, otherwise men become animals or objects, pushed about without exercising their own will or purpose in their behaviour. How wide such freedom has to be for a human being to be human is another question. However desirable absence of obstruction, let alone oppression, may be, one cannot say that those who are oppressed (slaves, victims of persecution) are not

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human; but even they must have some minimum degree of choice, otherwise they cannot be regarded as fully human beings. The same applies to rationality. Unless these beings can have the power of comparing, generalising, abstracting, thinking about objects in their absence (as opposed to merely perceiving again), they cannot be called human. Creative? I am not so sure. It depends what one means. If by creative one means directing one's life in some kind of deliberate way, then of course; but if it means creating works of art, then of course human beings can be creative without any gift or even capacity for that. But perhaps one really means by creative capable of expressing themselves, communicating what they feel and think and want in images, words, gestures, religious rites, song, dance, other forms of human expression. If this is what one means, then of course creative is equally intrinsic. And so is social: however solitary a man may be, he is by nature a being capable of communicating with others in a real, or at least imaginary, social world, even if he is mad.

So far so good. But of course other doctrines attribute other attributes as [a] *sine qua non* for human beings, e.g. Christian thinkers, who believe that immortal souls, original sin, knowledge of God are intrinsic in that way. And I daresay there may be thinkers who think that capacity for foresight, remorse, love for truth, for justice, for happiness and the like are also part of what one means when one says 'human being'. Of all that I am not so sure – I would like to think it. But I think one cannot deny that one can conceive of somebody as a human being, however low-grade, who may lack some of these properties; and, in the case of religious attributes, perhaps all of them. It simply depends on how one conceives of the notion of a human being, not just objectively oneself, but as a member of a culture continuous with many other cultures – certainly in the West, but for all I know perhaps in the rest of the world too. It is not an arbitrary definition, but a presupposition of thinking about human relationships in any form.

**[Oxford and Cambridge philosophy]**

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TO CONOR CRUISE O'BRIEN

10 April 1991

[...] Herder[']s ideas were of course rooted in a Francophobe anti-levelling universalism. But I think I wish to stick up for Herder and *das Volk* as not being utopian; about 'sinister consequences' I shall talk later. I think all Herder was trying to maintain was that all men have a central need to belong, not necessarily to be identified with a particular regime, only with a society which one feels to be one's own; the criterion being that one can understand people, and they understand you, half instinctively, without needing the constant mental translation and interpretation which inevitably occurs if one is outside or lives in foreign societies with a different culture. I think that he believed in Mao's thousand flowers – a peaceful unity of mutually admiring *Völker*. I think Mazzini wanted this too: believed in Young Italy, Young Germany, Young everybody else, all living in beautiful harmony together. The fact that the history of nationalism is very different is another, and of course rather sinister, development. All Herder looked on as the criteria of a culture was [sc. were] language and soil, not blood. Certainly there is nothing in him of the horrors of *ein Land, ein Volk, ein Führer*. After all, he was violently anti-imperialist, anti-coercion, hated Alexander and Caesar for trampling on native cultures; when a preacher in Riga, he did not for a moment demand or hope for German hegemony, and was very amiable about Slavs, Letts etc. People can't be blamed for the consequences of their views; at least, not blamed much. Hegel is not a real ancestor of the Nazis, even though Popper, and probably Gombrich, both think so. I am always moved by the story (which I think I tell) about the Christian missionary who was trying to convert an American Indian on his deathbed, and said, 'If you make a confession and accept our faith, I think you will find your passage to the next world easier and may go to heaven.' The Indian looked at him and said, 'Are there many white people in your heaven?' The missionary admitted that there probably were. 'In that case', said the Indian, 'I don't want to go there', turned on his side and died. I think this is very distant from the 'sinister' consequences of which you are thinking. It is true that central Europe and the Balkans, and even, I suspect, some people in

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Russia – for he was translated quite early in the nineteenth century – were influenced by him quite deeply, but at that stage did they seek more than harmless cultural autonomy? In the way in which the Austro-Marxists preached it before the First World War? Mild enough, considering what it all turned into. [...]

TO CLAUDE GALIPEAU

15 April 1991

[L4 415]

**[those of the general community.]** When I said that Belgium, Canada, etc. are different in this respect, no doubt a greater degree of latitude must be given to sectional education – but only if the conditions I have stated above are realised. So that I think that if the collision is between two values – what you rightly call ‘group tolerance’ plus the provision of funding versus ‘social division and ethnic strife’ – [this] is a case of the incompatibility of values, but I come down squarely on the first side. But that is ultimately subjective, I would not enforce it. I can only say that that is what I approve of, am in favour of, support – cultural pluralism can and should be permitted, provided, I repeat again ad nauseam, the conditions I stated above are preserved. I do not recognise the justice of the remark made by Kocis about an alleged tension in my work between Herderian populism and attachment to personal liberty. I think that they need not clash: if they do, I think moderate populism, in my case, wins – but I would never legislate in its favour, beyond the limits, I say for the nth time, I have already stated. [...]

TO HENRY HARDY

17 April 1991

Dear Henry,

[...] Can Christianity and other universalist religions retain their integrity if they drop their universalism? Certainly not. You are perfectly right. A non-universalist Christianity and a non-universalist Judaism are equally absurd. What I think people like

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Sacks and such mean (apart from a certain degree of political tact to which they are committed) is that all religions are basically universal in their appeal, and not ethnic – they express truths and an outlook which are valid for all men, everywhere, at all times. But some religious denominations believe that all men seek the truth (which is one and not many) each by his own route and that it is wrong to force people, against their conviction, to seek the truth by a favoured route; that every effort must be made to understand and explain to oneself and to the others what it is that the goals which they pursue have in common, are, indeed, paths to the same goal, etc. That, I think, is what is at the back of religious toleration on the part of true believers.

Can a pluralist belong to a universalist religion? Yes (unlike your answer), he can. That only means he professes the universalist religion of his own, but allows other religions or views or whatever to be expressed – unless they offend against what must be called the large minimum accepted as a common moral code, in at any rate the Western world, but maybe beyond – but I don't know much about the East or Africa; however, I think that, pluralist or not, one is entitled to suppress (to use the harshest term I can think of), or in some cases, where it is possible, to dissuade people from committing crimes, acts subversive of, or too disturbing to, a given society, whatever the agent's religious beliefs. The British were right to suppress suttee in India, and other forms of physical interference. They were also right to suppress the thuggees [sc. thugs]. I am quite happy to say that no matter how pluralist a society is, it is entitled to resist, make illegal, any form of terrorism – IRA, Shamir, or whatever. In other words, I think there are certain common principles which human beings, in a great many places and a great many ages, have almost universally accepted. That must act as a barrier to excess of pluralist freedom. However, I believe there is such a thing as a dominant culture in every society, and that that society has a right to preserve that dominant culture and prevent it from being too far eroded by religious or ethnic persuasions which are not compatible with it. This is a typical clash of incompatible values, but I can only say what I myself believe – namely, that a degree of solidarity and peace is something that every society is fully entitled to; morally, politically and socially entitled to – and therefore, as I have had to reply to another correspondent of mine, religious practices which go

## MORE EXPLAINING

against accepted morality (encourage murder, or various forms of oppression of certain human beings – infidels, women, blacks, whites) can be legitimately resisted in a pluralist liberal society. Indeed, a liberal (pluralist) society is one in which such practices ought to be excluded. But of course, a wide variety of practices which do not threaten the moral foundations of the dominant culture should be freely permitted, even if not positively encouraged.

In answer to your question 3: yes, it is possible, given the conditions I have stated, among which there are bound to be, for example in educational practice, the need to a curriculum which overlaps between various religions, ethnic etc. groups sufficiently not to distort – or what the dominant culture would think to be likely to distort – the education of children; so ethnic or religious schools must not be permitted to forbid the dominant language, or the teaching of what might be called general history as certified by impartial judges taken from the dominant community – or mathematics – whatever we take to be the general need of human beings for being adequately educated. Pluralism certainly does not demand freedom in this respect, or other aspects of a similar kind, if you see what I mean.

You speak of ‘flying in the face of the truth about human nature’ – but it is narrower than that – flying in the face of a minimum of commonly accepted moral and political ideas. So the answer to your question 3 is the following: ‘a pluralist society has the right to oppose views which are those of a given individual or group, but not their right to follow them unless they offend against the conditions given above.

4. Of course they should be tolerated, as you say, this side of causing suffering to others. If too much suffering is caused – perhaps a very small amount of irritation doesn’t matter – then not. Of course one has the right to be ‘an evangelist’ for the abandonment of universalist beliefs: it is certainly legitimate, and in my opinion desirable, but that is only *my* opinion – I recognise the need to tolerate those who reject this as desirable, provided ... etc.

Is this satisfactory? I do hope so. If not, do go on pressing me, I don’t mind a bit, it is only Pat upon whose shoulders the dreadful burden of my answers lies. [...]



## MORE EXPLAINING

TO HENRY HARDY

6 May 1991

[...] pluralism and universalism: let me explain. A pluralist does not need to maintain that there are no single, objective answers to ultimate questions. All he has to say is that he holds certain beliefs which for him are, if not absolute, held as part of his general *Weltanschauung*, which he believes to be correct. When I say 'believes to be', that means that unless it is refuted he will hold on to it through thick and thin, and even perhaps give up his life for its central values or principles. At the same time, he has to say that this may one day have to be modified, changed – that there is no guarantee of anything absolute in the empirical world. Nevertheless, so far as he is concerned, that is what he finally believes and there's an end on't. At the same time, he is aware that other people have similarly strong convictions of a different kind. He believes them to be mistaken; but what makes him a pluralist is that he is able to understand, by some kind of imaginative empathy, how it is that people living under the circumstances of these others, or brought up as they have been, or having the character or the mind that they have, should believe in these other things; they are certainly mistaken, in his view, but it is not an unworthy thing to believe these things – one must tolerate them, unless they threaten the very bases of the existences of himself and his culture, etc. Certainly a universalist cannot be a pluralist; but one can be a pluralist and believe in the universal validity of one's own views, and in the error of other views – but not in the impermissibility of holding them. And also one must be able to sympathise with the kind of people who hold those kinds of views, and see what kind of worlds these people live in, what kind of outlook they have – and perhaps find something of value in it. What one must not do is to assert one's view to be absolute for all time and every universe in an a priori, utterly incorrigible fashion – in that sense of course a pluralist can't be a universalist. It is not simply a question of toleration, it goes further – it denies the validity of views different from one's own, while at the same time understanding how one might live and believe what these mistaken persons believe. Is that all right? [...]

## MORE EXPLAINING

TO CLAUDE GALIPEAU

16 May 1991

[...] As for suppression of customs which we find abhorrent – suttee etc. – these things can be the basis of religions, just as burning the Jews alive along the Rhineland may have been regarded as basic to militant Christianity by the Crusaders. But I believe, as you know, in what might be called general human values – not universal, not absolute, not demonstrably eternal, objective, ubiquitous, but that which a great many people have believed for a great many years, in a great many places. This constitutes the nearest equivalent to natural law that empiricists like me accept. When such concepts as human rights or natural justice or the like occur, it is to this kind of minimal general morality, in terms of which human beings can communicate with each other on moral or political issues, which one refers to. If something contravenes these rules – if such they may be called, in the absence of some a priori basis – then, in my view, one is entitled to enforce them against violation, no matter what traditional central beliefs, loyalties, religious values one may thereby contravene. People usually assume that by argument, persuasion, every kind of means of arriving at some understanding, one can convince the benighted fanatics that they are mistaken. And in some cases no doubt missionaries have succeeded in doing this. But ultimately this is simply an opportunistic assumption which we all, to some extent, accept but none of us can guarantee. [...]

TO HENRY HARDY

3 June 1991

[...] I believe that if one is a pluralist, one can believe that one's position (normally deeply connected with one's *Kulturkreis*, as Schlick calls it) is that one can pursue a constellation of values in which one completely believes, but does not regard as objective, a priori etc.; and that, based on this, one can approve, condemn, doubt, question, other people's constellations. What makes one a pluralist is that one can, by empathetic imagination, sometimes

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grasp what other people, in other circumstances, have come to pursue, and not simply rule it out as objectively valueless, only, at most, as disgusting, repellent, dangerous to all that one believes and is willing to live or die for, and therefore sometimes to be fought, perhaps to the point of killing.

I do not regard the Nazis, e.g., as mad: the idea of sub-men is intelligible but grotesquely false, but if you accept it, then the horrors about the Jews may follow. You may have to kill people one regards as totally evil and dangerous from the point of view of one's own beliefs, and justify this by basing one's action on what a great many people, in a great many places and times, accepted without question. But even that does not make this eternal, a priori etc. Of course pluralism and monism are totally incompatible.

Is this OK?

TO HENRY HARDY

18 June 1991

[...] As for monism, etc., I can go on replying to that for ever – I can only repeat, in a brief and unsatisfactory sentence, that I believe that one can be totally dedicated to a particular set of opinions, beliefs, loyalties, outlook and, at the same time, recognise the possibility of other such, which one rejects but believes to be equally semi-objective (as you more or less put it) – only not objective because, save for real fixities, things we cannot escape from, categories, time, space, material objects, incompatibility of values, truth, goodness, etc. – save for these, nothing is. So I agree with you: if you wish to be a total Christian, you must reject everything else as falsehood; but you can be one if you allow the possibility of other faiths, provided that you reject them for yourself but do not regard others, who hold them, as inhuman or even inferior, but simply as different and to some degree incapable of full communication with yourself. [...]

MORE EXPLAINING

TO HENRY HARDY

1 July 1991

[...] Now, about our eternal subject. I think this may be my final word. I agree that if you are a Christian and a universalist, then you think that persons who hold other faiths are mistaken and wrong. But it is possible to be sympathetic to false or implausible beliefs. If I were a Christian missionary, say in the eighteenth century, and found a sympathetic Red Indian, of course I would believe that what he believed was rubbish, but, quite apart from the probability of conversion, I could believe that his general spiritual attitude, set of values (supposing he was not keen on murder, scalping etc.) was sympathetic, moving, interesting and revealed certain things about reality which my faith perhaps did not. That is perfectly compatible with thinking that what he believed fundamentally was totally false. That is what I mean by imaginative insight, etc.

Now for your obverse. Certainly to understand is not to assent; and even if I understand how Fascists or Muslims reach their views, I am not sure that I know what you mean by 'logically legitimate' – do you mean that it is logically possible both to believe what one does believe and also regard their views as legitimate? If so, I agree. But illegitimate views may also reveal and appeal. So I don't begin to assent to monist views – as you say, toleration is another matter. But toleration does not entail approval. The Catholic who decided to tolerate Protestantism cannot be accused of approving it. And I agree that there probably are credal limits to cultural variety: there are beliefs and attitudes which one rules out absolutely, understands but totally condemns, and would wish to eliminate, ideally. Is that OK? I hope so: if it isn't, I can do no more. [...]

TO MORTON WHITE

9 September 1991

Headington House

Dear Morton,

I do not know how to begin this letter. I received your typescript, took it to Italy with me (whither I shall have returned,

after a brief visit to London, by the time this letter is typed) and began reading it, and realised fairly soon that the gulf between us is unbridgeable (is that a logical or an empirical proposition? I leave you to answer this). Let me begin, first of all, by saying something about my beliefs, and then come to your text, which I did not read beyond p. 20, as I realised that it was no good, I would simply repeat myself in denying, contradicting, not understanding, being obstinate, wooden, intolerable – so that you would simply be, first incredulous, then bored, then indignant, and finally outraged by what I have to say.

When I take my stand so irreversibly on, to put it in its crude, popular form, ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ – I must explain that even I think that ‘can’ is not a clear concept. When I say ‘Oh dear, I wonder if I can do it ...’, I don’t really express doubts about my ability, still less my freedom, but something to do with what I would wish or be inclined to do in the circumstances – something like ‘Can I bring myself to do it?’. If I say ‘I went to see him, realising that I had the plain duty to tell him that what he did was wrong, and then, when I was actually in his presence, I could not do it – he was so charming and had done so much for me and was about to do so much more; and I changed the subject (rather like a story in Keynes’s *Essay in Biography* about the man who tried to do that to Lloyd George, and ended up by not saying anything) – I just could not say those words, and left deeply frustrated and rather ashamed’: what that means to me is that ‘can’ is being used in a weak sense – where it really means ‘I think it my duty to do X but haven’t the will powers – or think I haven’t, or cannot face the prospect, where ‘cannot’ really means ‘the price is too high’; of course I can; but I am not prepared to go through with it. I am not sure about the case of an addict, to whom you say ‘You can stop taking drugs’ – and he says ‘I cannot, I’m addicted’ – and you say ‘Yes, but if you are threatened with death, you would stop’, and the man says ‘Possibly – but in ordinary circumstances I have no control over myself in this respect’. I am not sure where the line comes between real inability and the kind of inability which we think is a form of not being prepared to face the horrible cost – which to me means that in fact you *can* if you want to, and to some degree do want to, but don’t want to violently enough. Perhaps in the case of the addict we are getting on to a level where people are no longer responsible for their acts, in which case I shouldn’t have

thought that in ordinary cases of law, etc., those who suffer from ‘diminished responsibility’ are regarded as having obligations, but you will disagree. But in all these cases of ‘can’, the word ‘free’ really does come in. I don’t say ‘I tried to say to him that he gave me that terrible look, I was not free to do it ...’, or ‘He was my father, I obeyed him all my life, I just couldn’t ...’. You wouldn’t say ‘I was not ‘free’ to ...’, because in fact we think there is a sense in which you were free. At least, this is my case.

But there is a sense of ‘can’ and ‘free’ where that is literally not so. If I say, first to take a trivial example, ‘I know that it was my duty to deliver a lecture on Tuesday, but I could not because I was in prison; or because I was tied to a tree; or because I was hopelessly ill and physically could not get up’; then I think there is a case for saying no can, no ought, which is what I believe.

You ask, on p. 1. of your piece, about my assertion Brutus being free to kill Caesar: the implication is logical, in the sense that Brutus is a man logically implies that Brutus is an animal – or not. I am not sure about ‘logical’ – ‘conceptual’ is enough for me: it is conceptually, not logically, impossible to be in two places at once; conceptually impossible to add two cubits to my height.

And so with this obstinate proposition in my head, I have to say that on your p. 2, when you say that Brutus ought to kill Caesar, Brutus is ‘free’ to kill Caesar, rests on a moral principle, etc., I don’t believe that if only because I don’t think that moral principles can state a fact. Similarly, in the same paragraph, when you say the adviser cannot immediately, on logical grounds alone, deduce the statement that Brutus is free to kill Caesar, I have to say that I disagree completely – I have to say that ‘Brutus ought to kill Caesar’ and ‘Brutus is not free to kill Caesar’ is, as you say, unintelligible, in the sense that there is a conceptual incoherence, conceptual conflict. So, on your p. 12, second para, ‘whatever action one is obligated to perform one is free to perform’ – ‘the very fact that this is a moral principle shows that it is not a logical principle’: I don’t think that does follow – there are such things as collision between a moral and a factual concept. And so, too, the last four lines of that paragraph. So, for example, on p. 16 – I find it to be objectionable because it violates that moral principle ‘Whatever one ought to perform one can choose to perform’: I have to say once again, in a boring way, that is not, to me, a moral principle; it is a conceptual truth. That is why your ‘every singular

conjunction which has the form “A ought to be done by B but B cannot choose to do A” is, in conceptual terms, perfectly true for me. On p. 17, ‘Brutus ought to kill Caesar, but Brutus cannot choose to kill Caesar’ may be based on a synthetic conceptual truth that links the two mentioned concepts. Certainly, conceptual is right, and synthetic is right, and I do not see why not; it is not meaningless in the sense of ‘the number 5 is brown’, which makes no sense – the other does make sense but is seen to be false, conceptually false, in a way which ‘red is less like yellow than it is like black’ can be seen to be false.

So, on p. 18, you say, quite rightly, ‘the question at issue is whether it is nonsense to say, of a non-free action, that it will be performed’. You say it is not nonsense; I say, well, if not nonsense, perhaps, not meaningless, but false on conceptual grounds. On the same page, last para, ‘Every citizen has a duty to kill a tyrant when he has the opportunity to do so.’ And then he doesn’t. That’s quite clear, because to have an opportunity is to be free. p. 19, top – ‘[ ] is speaking unintelligibly’. No, not unintelligibly, only too intelligibly, but, as Kant in fact believed, false a priori, so to speak, in the sense that when concepts clash that is the only acceptable form of a priorism in these days that we – or at least, I – accept.

I have reached p. 20, and simply could not go on reading. I could see that I would stumble against every single one of your most dearly held propositions. Forgive me. I think it is no good. I think we really are divided by some mysterious block, stone wall, which neither of us can penetrate. These things happen – I know that Kant did not think that whether we were free or not was an empirical fact, because all empirical facts and empirical things were causally determined, and this was therefore noumenal – but I believe it is possible to translate a statement, like every other intelligible, noumenal proposition, into empirical terms; and then have a look at what it looks like then. I can no more. A thousand times I beg your pardon. You should publish your piece – from even glancing through the other pages I see that it is beautifully argued, and a great many people will agree with you – I can only hide behind our old friend Austin, who once said to me, as I think I may have told you, ‘I know they say they are determinists. But have you ever met one?’ So I line up with him, with Kant, with Renouvier, with William James, with Bernard Williams, and say to you I can no more – ‘Hier steh Ich; Ich kan nicht anders.’ Or as

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poor Marshal MacMahon said at, I think, Sedan in 1870, 'J'y suis, j'y reste.' Once again, I can only beg you to forgive me, and let us correspond on some other subject – you know how much I admire your work, and always shall.

Yours ever,  
Isaiah

TO CHARLES LARMORE

10 October 1991

Headington House

Dear Professor Larmore,

Thank you very much for your letter of 18 September, which I have seen on return from abroad.

I understand the point you make very well indeed. The question of the hierarchy of ultimate values is undoubtedly a very difficult one. My view, for what it is worth – but I can give you no arguments for it, only that it seems to me to be the case (and, on reflection, I do not think it can be otherwise) – is that ultimate ends are ends; those who seek them as final values, seek them in that way; a given individual – or even culture (and I stress the fact that ultimate values of that kind are not as a rule the values of isolated individuals) – that is very rare and Byronic – but those of a culture to which one belongs, so that one shares such values with others who belong to one's culture, and that is what makes discussion between them, argument, cooperation, communication in general, natural and inevitable: that individuals and cultures of this kind, pursuing their values as they do, can of course condemn the values of other cultures, even if they understand them (that is the *sine qua non* of pluralism as I conceive of it); and, even more, rate their own values in relation to the values of these others in some order – so that, as you say, one can believe and behave in the light of one's own hierarchy – which entails some kind of attitude towards the ultimate values of others – one can be against them, regard them as different but incapable of measurement against one's own and therefore uncriticisable, or one can rate them in some order of higher and lower in accordance with one's own outlook and constellation of values.



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Again, within one's own horizon – constellation – one can certainly regard some ultimate values as of greater importance than others; one just does that because one does it. Perhaps one could explain that certain values contribute more to one's general conception of how life should be lived than others, although they are all equally ultimate. Nevertheless, in the end ultimate values within one's own outlook or that of one's culture are ultimate – and one chooses as one chooses, one loses as one loses. I don't know if that is a satisfactory answer – it has a certain flavour of subjectivity which I think is inevitable in all ethical evaluation, unless you accept a genuine objectivity of values, which I cannot persuade myself is valid.

You speak of Herder. He does indeed talk about progress, and Vico does too. But I think that this is ultimately inconsistent with their basic propositions. There is certainly talk of *Fortschritt* in Herder, particularly in his last works, and in Vico's *New Science* there are vague allusions to the general progress of mankind. But given their premises and their central positions, this is surely inconsistent? Each culture progresses along its own path in Vico; each culture has its own 'centre of gravity', – *Schwerpunkt* – which differs from those of others; that is what makes understanding them both difficult and necessary. So the idea of universal progress is just as incompatible with a fundamental position as that of some ultimate perfection.

But of course I agree with you – Herder would certainly not regard the morality of primitive tribes as equal in value to his own; but that does not prevent him from seeking to understand these cultures in their own terms, without judging, without praising and condemning; although he is perfectly entitled to do that in terms of his own outlook and beliefs and those of society. In other words, cultures are what they are – ultimate ends are what they are. It is perfectly permissible and natural to accept or reject – above all to grade certain values in preference to others, whether of one's own culture or that of others, in terms of one's own outlook. When I must make a choice between, let us say, liberty and equality, or knowledge and happiness, or justice and mercy, the fact that I choose what I choose indicates that I rank one of these values, in the particular context in which I am thinking, as higher than the other, but there is no objectionable criterion (though I

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may of course change my mind, circumstances may change, and the order may therefore alter).

I wonder if I have made this clear? I have a feeling that you may not find my account of this entirely satisfactory, but I hope that this is not so. I am grateful to you for asking this very crucial question.

Yours sincerely,  
Isaiah Berlin

TO HENRY HARDY

19 November 1991

Headington House

Dear Henry,

Thank you for your letter about Sacks. I think you are right – whatever the curious arguments advanced, it cannot be true that one can recognise ‘the absolute claims of one’s own religion on oneself, but not need to wish outsiders to join in’. This won’t do. Either religion is true, or it is not, and Sacks is very careful not to talk about truths and falsehoods. There is a good deal of interest in what he says, but this particular proposition, which he somehow does want either to circumnavigate or dissolve, refuses to be so treated. You and I agree about that. I have no idea what it means to say that something can be absolute but not universal, as he says. ‘The question confuses absoluteness with universality’ – I am absolutely bound by marriage but not universally bound: what on earth does that mean? That my marriage is done by one kind of formula and other people’s marriages by theirs? That marriage rites differ between communities? Yes – but Jewish marriages are real marriages, and other people’s marriages can only be recognised insofar as they share something indispensable with Jewish marriage; that is certainly the doctrine of the Catholic Church. [...]

TO HENRY HARDY

22 November 1991

[...] Of course there are cultures which are not aware of their differences from other cultures. But what I meant was that if there

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was one universal culture, the variety and differences which at present occur, and can be part of a consciousness of members of a given culture, would disappear, and this would dehydrate everything. But it is perfectly true that if you are a Bashkir somewhere the other side of the Urals, whether your culture does or does not differ from that of the Tadzhiks can make no possible difference to you. All I wanted to say is that given the situation in which one culture can be aware of another, a flattening out of the whole thing would be terrible. If the world were divided into compartmentalised non-communicating cultures nothing would matter at all.

I think I do believe in some minimal identical content to all human moral outlooks. But even if this weren't so, and A was like B and B was like C and A was not in the least like P, let alone R and S, there would still be enough common element to any given series of cultures for there to be something intercommunicative. But it is true that if A and B had nothing in common, that communication would break down and they could not be regarded as part of the same human race. I am not sure what follows – that you might work out. [...]

TO ERIC MACK<sup>6</sup>

3 February 1992

[L4 435]

**[That is what creates the possibility of coexistence, of social life, of communication.]**

What you say at the top of your p. 21 again seems to me right. There is a need of some cement to bind society, as an antidote to

<sup>6</sup> EM had sent IB the typescript of 'The Limits of Diversity: The New Counter-Enlightenment and Isaiah Berlin's Liberal Pluralism', which had been accepted for publication in Howard Dickman (ed.), *The Imperiled Academy* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London, 1993), where it appears at 97–126. Some time after Berlin responded, EM sent him the typescript of 'Isaiah Berlin and the Quest for Liberal Pluralism', which had been accepted for publication in *Public Affairs Quarterly* 7 no. 3 (July 1993), where it appears at 215–30. He remembers enclosing a note saying that this article took a more critical view of IB Berlin than the other essay. IB did not reply.

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disruptive individualism, pluralism and the kind of aggressive demands of a destructive kind by which American universities are at present plagued. In fact, I would go further. You speak of enormous diversity of societies. Perhaps it is not quite so enormous. One can exaggerate differences between individuals, groups, societies, cultures, ages etc. – there could be no continuous human history if this had not been so. And this does not merely apply to Western civilisation, but, I think, throughout – no doubt it is difficult to come to [an] accommodation with militant Islam, or the mysterious ways of life of the Japanese, or the inhabitants of the rain forests of Brazil, but it is not impossible; otherwise missionaries would never have got anywhere.

Your remarks on p. 22, in footnote 38, are absolutely correct. These common values, the common ground of mankind, historically speaking, is quite large; but I do not think this entails some kind of ‘ultimate human good’ of your p. 26. The area of consent and understanding may be large, but this does not entail monism – different cultures, individuals, groups can still pursue different forms of life, and should be restrained only if too much damage is done to the fabric of society (something different from ‘ultimate human good’). So also the ultimate fabric of a university dedicated to specific values, say the study of nature and what men have done and suffered (Aristotle says ‘what Alcibiades did and suffered’). In this sense, pluralism survives.

Your real criticism of me begins on p. 28. You ask how one can talk of balanced claims, compromises etc. if values are really incommensurable, let alone compatible – if there are enormous differences. True, if the differences are enormous then all talk of compromise and trade-offs is idle. But I do not believe this. I have to repeat that values like peace, order, freedom, justice, truth, mercy, the difference between good and bad, right and wrong, are pretty widespread. There is no need to assume that all these values are common to all cultures at all times, only that a sufficient proportion of them is to be found in each one; and if there is a sufficient overlap, as it were, there exists a sufficient number of identical or similar values and goals. Of course anyone who pursues one goal only, and is blind to all others, is a hopeless fanatic, and with such people compromises are difficult if not impossible. But although this occurs, I believe (optimistically) that there are not enough individuals or faiths like this to make

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common life, a degree of understanding, wholly impossible. So I think your footnote 50 is genuinely mistaken. There is a common humanity; neither individuals nor groups nor universities are isolated, insulated within some bubble where there is no communication possible like the nomads of Leibniz. A bubble like that is simply a form of bigotry or idolatry.

What I do not follow is your third paragraph on p. 29. Tyranny of this kind, to which the misinterpretation or distortion of positive liberty leads, as I tried to point out in my essay on 'Two Concepts of Liberty', can only be opposed by the kind of tolerant compromise which is required if there is a clash, e.g., of positive and negative liberty, which often happens. I fully concede that. I ought to have made it far clearer than I did (about that you are quite right) what the restraining factors, the limits, of pluralism must necessarily be if any of the ultimate values (given that there are several of them) are to be observed at all, in any society. Again, para. 2 on p. 31 – I am not clear about what you mean. Surely you do not mean to deny that the capacity for choice must belong to anyone who can be called a human being? Not to have this capacity is to be reduced to a zombie or an animal. That is the sense in which I think liberty underlies all other values. But I ought to have distinguished between two kind of liberty: (*a*) the kind I have just referred to, which is the presupposition certainly of all morality, all humanity, and (*b*) the positive and negative liberties which are ultimately political demands and belong to a kind of second order, above the basic liberty without which action cannot exist, one among many values which clash, sometimes combine, are sometimes harmonious, sometimes incompatible, where one must do one's best. What is meant by 'one's best'? I suppose something which is acceptable within the horizon of values, even if they clash within which my life is lived; and not just my life, but that of the society to which I belong, which has shaped me, where I intercommunicate with others; and more than that, perhaps something larger than that, something like, say, Western civilisation, which you and I (perhaps secretly) believe to be the only real, or at any rate the superior, civilisation – at any rate during the last two or three thousand years. [...]

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TO HENRY HARDY

18 February 1992

[L4 439]

### **[not of great interest to me.]**

There is no need for a pluralist not to prefer one ultimate value to another, if they come into conflict; nor to condemn somebody else's values if they are opposed to, or even intolerant of his own – they remain objective nevertheless. The fact that there is no overarching principle does not entail that individuals, groups, parties, Churches etc. can't create one for themselves. I am prepared to say that, as Vico said, Homeric values are not ours, but they are ultimate values, and you can give reasons for saying that, ultimate as they may be, they clash with one's own, and therefore must take second, third, fourth place. I see no contradiction there. In the end one sometimes has to plump – one just believes what one believes, acts as one acts. If you are asked for the reason, you cannot always give it – but that again does not entail non-rating. [...]

TO HENRY HARDY

13 April 1992

[...] The basic reason for rejecting relativism is the 'moral core', but the reason for pluralism, which is also incompatible with relativism but a separate doctrine, is, as you say, empathy with values which we may or may not share but which belong to other cultures. I do not see why this answer takes any wind out of any of your sails. You are right to say that I believe relativism to be false on both grounds; on the other hand, it is also true that without the first ground – i.e. the common ground between the vast majority of systems of values in different cultures or among different persons – the second ground would not work. Is this confused? I do hope not.

Your diagram [reproduced in *The One and the Many*] is excellent, and I think does represent my views.

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As for your queries: there are such things as subjective values, which are not ultimate in any way and may not be capable of being empathised with – e.g. questions of taste, minor preferences and the opposite – I may be totally unable to empathise with people who can't bear music – I merely note that there are such people and this is true of them. So I think that in the case of non-ultimate and sometimes rather trivial differences of taste, you could speak of subjective values in a perfectly valid way – i.e. no common ground presupposed in such cases: total lack of sympathy, or maybe understanding.

In my view you could not empathise with a psychopath, but I may be wrong about this. I think some people claim to be able to do so – if they do, they do. But my conception of psychopath is somebody with whom there is no communication.

Are there non-ultimate true values? What is meant by 'true'? Values are values – they are true for those for whom they are true. Or what do you mean?

TO CHARLES GOLDING<sup>7</sup>

4 May 1992

[...] I wish I could reply to your question in some clear and firm fashion, but I will do my best. To begin with, of course, there is a question of conflict between a morally unjust law and one's deepest moral convictions, whether religious or not. That is the position of an atheist pacifist, who regards it as totally wrong to kill anyone for any reason when he is conscripted to serve in war; 'conscientious objection' is the rubric under which such people were either exempted or given non-combatant duties – some of them refused to do even that, on the ground that it in some way assisted the war, and some, like Ramsey MacDonald, went to jail for rejecting all possible arguments and reasons. Anyway, let us come back to the original question.

You speak of a morally unjust law, but the question is wider than that. Supposing there is a law which you might not think morally unjust – for example, that forbidding ritual kosher slaughter (as, for example, in Switzerland) – and, since you are a

<sup>7</sup> Then Associate Editor of the *Sunday Express*.

pious Jew, do you openly or secretly continue kosher slaughter? Presumably not, because you have no obligation to eat meat, that is not a moral imperative, however inconvenient it may be for some people. But now, let us return to the pacifist point. Supposing, as a pious Jew, you accept the Ten Commandments totally; one of them tells you not to kill; you take that literally; your country is at war; a victory by the enemy might wipe out not only a great many of your fellow citizens, Jews and non-Jews, but perhaps create a position in which Jewish worship and Jewish life is made utterly impossible (e.g. by the Nazis). You now have a conflict of two values: one, not to kill; and one to preserve a form of life which enables you to perform your most elementary duties, religious and secular. When you have a total conflict between two absolute ends like this, then, if you are a pious Jew, you simply look up the answer in the book; the book tells you not to kill, so you refrain from defending your country and its institutions because it says nothing in the Book about preserving the Jewish religion or the possibility of worship. Alternatively, you regard the defence of your country – you are a patriotic citizen of whatever faith – and the preservation of the minimum form of life in which you can perform your religious duties, {and} also as an absolute value, which nothing may contravene – in which case you have an insoluble conflict. In those circumstances, you must just simply make up your mind which value you want to preserve, however terrible it is to sacrifice the other one. Lots of more trivial choices always involve sacrificing one good thing to preserve another, but mostly these are not absolute values, simply things one likes or admires or wants or enjoys or believes in in some non-absolute way. But in the case you offered me, where you think two values are absolute (as I suspect you think), i.e. obeying a morally unjust law and fulfilling the obligations imposed upon you by religious belief, then you must simply choose whichever of these courses of conduct fits in best with your general moral and religious outlook. Others may think otherwise, but you simply decide which choice you regard as the least intolerable, morally and religiously; and that is up to each individual himself. Mostly, the Jewish law tells you what to do. For instance, in the awful situation in which the SS man faces a Jew, say in Hungary, with the choice of either being killed himself or collaborating with the Nazis, which might enable him to save not only himself but so many other people also (which



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is what happened), the Jewish law is clear: you are not allowed to participate in the killing of the Jews other than those you might save<sup>8</sup> – however indirectly participate – in which case you allow yourself to be killed by the Nazis. I do not think it is that simple. I think faced with two appalling choices you must simply decide what you believe to be right: let yourself be killed, collaborate and save sixty others, commit suicide, or whatever choice you think is the least horrible. And we have no right to judge people on what they have done, as some people have in the past.

That's the only answer I can offer you. If religion means everything to you, then you simply follow religious law and sacrifice everything else, including obeying the secular law, just or unjust, to it. But if you have a wider horizon it is not simple. I doubt if I have solved your painful question, but I have done my best. [...]

TO HARRY JAFFA

24 May 1992

Headington House

Dear Professor Jaffa,

Thank you for your letter of 18 May and also for the copy of your letter of 13 May to the NYRB. I am glad that my estimate of Leo Strauss is more or less similar to your own, and not to Strauss's principal detractors.

I think that my estimate, both of his character and of his writings, is probably more balanced and well-grounded than that of those who detest his doctrines. Nevertheless, I must confess that I do not accept his views either, in part or in whole.

I must also thank you for sending me a copy of his essay on relativism, critical of my views. I had no idea that this essay had appeared – all I knew is that someone, perhaps the late Professor Momigliano, told me that something of the sort was in the making. It is clear to me that Strauss radically misunderstood my position. I am not and have never been a relativist or, in his sense of the word, an historicist (although the latter could be disputed – but not by me). It is true that, like him, I believe that there are ultimate

<sup>8</sup> *Sic*. IB seems to mean that a Jew is not allowed to participate, however indirectly, in the killing of any Jews, even in order to save other Jews.

human values which have been accepted by men. I say (in the quotation given by Strauss) that they are ‘accepted so widely and grounded so deeply in the actual human nature of men as they have developed through history as to be by now an essential part of what we mean by being a normal human being’. And I speak of absolute stands. The point on which I differ from Strauss is that, of course, being an empiricist, I do not believe in any a priori basis for these beliefs. What I mean by ‘absolute’, ‘final’ beliefs, defending them if need be with one’s life, etc., are beliefs grounded in values which have been believed so widely for so long in so many human communities that they can be regarded as natural to human beings. This does not mean that they could not in principle alter, although this, in view of the past, seems very unlikely; and if they do, we cannot, being as we are, anticipate what they could possibly be. The difference between Strauss and me is simply between the absolute, a priori basis in which he believes, and the virtually, if only virtually, universal basis on which I ground these values. But, in addition to these, I was speaking of values which are products of their own time and culture, and to those who belong to these cultures these can be equally sacred, e.g. my concept of negative liberty, about which there is not much in the ancient world; or the value of sincerity, which I do not think can be found much, if at all, before the end of the seventeenth century; the rights of the individual, which *pave* Pericles’ speech in Thucydides and the Latin *iura*, which does not mean ‘rights’, can be found at the very earliest perhaps in Occam and, as a result of nominalism [...]. These are indeed products of a historical phase and can for the most part be accounted for as elements in a total constellation of values which characterise ages, cultures, periods. Strauss will have none of this. He believes that there are eternal values, valid for all men at all times – *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus* – which, since I do not believe in a faculty which can unveil eternal verities of that kind, I cannot accept. I can only accept very close approximations to them, as I have said above.

Moreover, I believe that ultimate values sometimes collide. Mercy, which is certainly a final absolute value for many, is incompatible with total justice; complete liberty and complete equality – and so on. The only universal values (in my sense, at any rate) are good and bad, true and false, and their derivatives such as right and wrong, beautiful and ugly – and so on. Since Strauss does

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not recognise the incompatibility of absolute values – for, according to him, all absolute values must be harmonious with each other, else what in his sense can be meant by saying that they are absolutely known a priori? – we disagree profoundly. My complaint is that he accuses me of relativism and, in effect, some kind of historicism, not in Popper’s sense but in the sense that values depend on history and have no permanent status – which is not true of certain of my beliefs, let alone his complete neglect of the collision of equally final values. I do not think that anything I could possibly say in reply to your letter to the NYRB would either convince yourself and other disciples of Strauss, or be news to those who accept or favour my beliefs. For that reason I see no purpose in replying to your courteous letter, and shall tell Silvers that apart from a note to the effect that I am neither a relativist nor an historicist, there is nothing that I would wish to comment upon.

I hope you will forgive me for this silence, and can only thank you for trying to persuade me to explain my position vis-à-vis Strauss, for the purpose of the advance of the human spirit and the discovery of the truth. But I do not think that anything I can write now can possibly convey what in all my writings since *Two Concepts of Liberty* I have tried to emphasise. Anyone who reads most of these will know where I stand, what my reasons are, and where Strauss has got me wrong. That is all I ask for. Thank you again for your letter and all its enclosures – it was very good of you to take me up on my remarks to the Iranian interviewer, which you had a perfect right, and indeed a perfectly estimable motive, for doing.

Yours sincerely,  
Isaiah Berlin

PS I ought to add that his attack on positivism and existentialism seems to me perfectly valid, although I wish he had gone further in explaining what it was that Heidegger – whose student he was and whom he evidently respected – had added to the sum of political thought – but I have never discovered it.

## MORE EXPLAINING

TO HENRY HARDY

2 March 1993

[...] 1. The common moral core and the human horizon are two different aspects of the same thing, as you suspect.<sup>9</sup> They are not two things. The common core is not so much the content of any morality, culture etc. as the limit of acceptability. The variety of human sets of values, cultures etc. are delimited by the common core or horizon, but are not distinct from it, in the sense that they are the ingredients of all the members of the variety, and without them the structure of the variety itself cannot stand, i.e. be intelligible (which is my criterion for identifying the various values, cultures, etc. that enter the plurality, which are, as you rightly say, not infinite in number). I should therefore maintain, your para. 4, 'the failure to embody the core' is not distinguishable 'from a failure to fall within the horizon'. I cannot understand the pin-pusher, therefore for me he falls outside the horizon of choosable ultimate values. I can understand someone who wants to destroy a civilisation, or cares nothing about human life, etc. – that falls within the human horizon, within the common core, but it is unacceptable to anyone who accepts my constellation of values – and that, I would maintain, of a great many other people at a great many times in a great many places. 'A great many' is variable. To be a pluralist is to be able to put oneself in the position of someone pursuing values very different from, and indeed perhaps wholly hostile to, one's own: I can reject the Homeric world (as described by Vico), which is brutal, mean, savage etc., although generative of masterpieces, while understanding it. All I can do is to assert my own conception of what is permissible and what is not, believe or hope that this forms a spectrum true for a great many people in a great many places, etc., though of course nowhere near everybody – in other words, distinguish sharply what is acceptable and what is intelligible. Hume's man who wants to destroy the world to assuage the pain in a little finger is to me literally unintelligible – that goes beyond the core and the horizon. There is a difference between a savage, Byronic outsider, or the

<sup>9</sup> This and the following explanation do not comprise his usual (or, in my view, his better) view.

Nazis, or those who think that blacks are not fully human beings, nearer animals than ourselves, etc., while going to war against them without compunction [*sic*]. Why? Because I defend the only civilisation without which I do not think life is worth living – others obviously disagree. I should maintain that it was not just I personally but a great many other people who form my culture – and a good many other people in the past, and one hopes in the future – [who] accept large portions of what I believe, i.e. look on the world in terms of horizons that greatly overlap with mine. But in the end I believe what I believe, defend what I defend – what is ultimate for me is ultimate for me – while still understanding the purposes of others which will destroy everything that I regard as minimally valuable, i.e. without which I do not think life in my sense can be lived, and therefore I wish to oppose with all that I have, unto death if need be in extreme cases. In that sense (your p. 2, top), the man who wishes to doom human societies is within the core and within the horizon – I may be able to understand his Nietzschean motives, but he is an enemy unto death.

I do not think that anything that is intelligible is beyond the horizon – beyond the horizon, yes, but not beyond the horizon that embraces all the possible (but not infinite) ultimate values.

My reason for rejecting the Byronic heroes, the tragic romantics, etc. (your p. 2, para. 2) is not because they fall outside *the* horizon of *the* core – they fall within it if I understand them – but because they make life in my section of the woods, my variant of all the possible sets of ultimate values, [here he must have omitted the word ‘impossible’, or ‘unacceptable’ – PU] – and that is enough. Of course, not all that lies within the horizon is acceptable, at least to me – I do not think that the values of others always constitute equally legitimate choices from among the available options, to use your phrase; but these are human choices, they do not make those who choose them inhuman; but they are certainly not all legitimate – legitimacy is conferred in the first place by the core, the horizon, i.e. that without which societies cannot go on, situations which one could not conceive as human – but in the second place, against any particular set of convictions. Those two are not the same – the second is a sub-class of the first.

I wonder if that makes anything clearer? Perhaps it isn't what you thought I thought – at least, that is what it seems to me at the

moment that I think. In other words, there are values which are parts of the core and the horizon, but against which I fight.

In your last paragraph you ask about 'arbitrary', etc. All I mean by arbitrary is something for which no reasons are, or apparently can be, given. What would be arbitrary but intelligible? The desire to collect large paintings but not small ones, not because you find them more attractive but for their own sake, no reason given – the man who does that is not mad, though he is eccentric – he has goals different from mine, he is fanatical, maybe; it just happens that that fulfils some deep desire of his, which psychoanalysis may or may not liberate him from: irrational, certainly; arbitrary, certainly; but unintelligible? No – I would know how to live with such a man, how to talk to him, how to ask him for his reasons, how to realise that he doesn't bother to give any because he doesn't think it necessary. I wonder if that makes things clearer; I do hope so.

Weber: I am ashamed to say that I have never read him, and now I feel it is too late. But I think you are right; I think where we agree is that he thinks that Hume is right and Kant and Plato are wrong – that statements of fact which are the sphere of science is different from the sphere of values; that factual statements cannot entail value statements, although there are ambivalent areas in which one is not sure whether the symbols one uses are those of fact or of values ('he is virtuous' – is that a term of praise, or a mere report on what he does in accordance with rules prescribed by somebody or other, which one need not accept, in which case it is a purely factual statement about someone's behaviour?). Then all the stuff by him about the conflict of values – true versus beautiful, holy versus good, etc. – that does speak to me. In other words, he accepts that ultimate values are what they are – that people simply proceed in their light, and that they can conflict and still remain ultimate values – polytheism, he calls it, now one god, now another; some of the gods are against each other, maybe, in which case one has to choose – in the end, though it is a terrible thing to say, in the very end, one has to plump – one can give reasons, but the reasons in the end will only proceed from some larger, wider, deeper plumping. So Weber is certainly an ally – but I had no idea he said anything of this when I invented my views, such as they are. [...]

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TO HENRY HARDY

3 May 1993

[...] If you think the John Gray book is OK, then I think it would be wiser of me not to ask to read it and not to tell him what I think is correct or incorrect. I think he must say in his Introduction that I have had nothing to do with it, that he didn't consult me, or show me anything, that he accepts full responsibility for the interpretation. I am sure it will do me proud, as you say, and if he gets me wrong here or there that cannot be helped. I could no doubt write him a letter about all that when the book appears, and ask him to correct things if he wants to in the next edition, if any. But I am sure it is not right for the subject to tamper with the author – it must be his impression and not mine that is offered to the public.

On the other hand, there is no reason why you shouldn't take up one or two points with him, as indeed you half suggest in your letter.

That pluralism means liberalism is only one of the possibilities ...: you are right, I do not think I do believe this – I concede that there are other ways of looking at life, just as that liberty is only one of the values we pursue; but just as there is a sense of liberty, in which without it you cannot pursue the values that we do pursue (at any rate, out of choice, as authors of our acts), so liberalism seems to me the only doctrine which actually preaches, if not the desirability of these points of view, at any rate the desirability of the toleration of them, of their variety – provided, of course, that none of them destroy the framework in which they operate, or endanger it in any serious sense.

As for the point about the measure of negative liberty that pluralism, according to me, entails, I think that does not fall short of full-grown liberalism – unless JG defines it in some special fashion – if he does, then he may be right, but his notion of liberalism must be even wider than mine. What 'post-liberalism' means, I am not at all sure – do tell me sometime. [...]

The moral unity of mankind. Indeed, we have talked about this, off and on, for a long time. I agree with you, even if I may have been vague or inconsistent on the subject – 'basic categories in common' is not enough, that simply means that everybody means

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something not dissimilar by ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘right’, ‘wrong’, etc. But if there is no common ground, no acceptance of particular values recognised as such by a sufficient number of people over a sufficiently long time, then you are right, the danger of relativism rears its hideous head. The question is: is understanding other people’s outlooks, cultures, etc. the same as sharing norms? I think it is: I think that if you say ‘I see how I might live in the light of this or that culture, believe in this or that as dominant values’ – this is not to accept this culture, these values, but mere understanding seems to me to create a community of shared ground. Is this (a) intelligible, (b) true? I am not sure – I hope so. [...]

TO FREDERICK BARNARD

3 May 1993

[...] I think the Herderian pluralism which we both appreciate has had some effect on John Rawls – who has departed, as you can see, from his strict semi-Kantian rationalist universalism towards something approaching the possibilities of the conflict of values, varieties, opinions, etc., which must nevertheless be regarded as legitimate within the kind of social-democratic schema to which I think he believes. His books on the whole are the best defence of old-fashioned social-democracy that we have, and none the worse for that; not that it will acquire a great many followers in the present world! I won’t comment on what is going on in Eastern Europe – nor in the ex-USSR. I think we’re in for some hideous times – nationalism is something I have written about, it is always due (at least, if I am right) to wounds inflicted by some outside power – and there are so many such wounds between the Danube and, let us say, the Yenisei, that the results are bound to be pretty terrible. Of course all things pass, in the end people do quieten down if they survive at all – and that is more or less the case in civilised countries today. But it won’t happen in my lifetime, I doubt if in yours. [...]



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TO HENRY HARDY

5 July 1993

You are, of course, quite right in saying that probably the wellspring of my interest in pluralism is that it provides a bulwark for liberalism – but not entirely. In the first place, liberalism can occur without pluralism, as in the case of, say, Benjamin Constant or even J. S. Mill, who approved of freedom of thought and expression, but not for pluralist reasons. But it is true that if pluralism, then some kind of liberalism necessarily follows. But my interest in it is, I think, intrinsic – simply deep devotion to the idea of variety, and delight in the diversity of human experience, which is no doubt a purely psychological fact about me – but then, William James rightly said that people’s philosophy is to do with their temperament and character – it is not quite the same as what Russell says, but equally true: some people like unity, tidiness, everything to proceed from a single centre – in fact, hedgehogs; others prefer diversity, untidiness, multiplicity and occasional miracles to interrupt the rigorous flow of causal continuities. I can’t deny that I belong to the second group.

Now, about the ‘accursed questions’. You are right that I probably was influenced by my Russian favourites about this and your central question. Evil people and evil acts: you are perfectly right – it is not only false empirical propositions which can lead to horrible behaviour; I merely said that to deny that the Nazis were literally mad, as people sometimes thought, and to explain the conduct of ordinary non-evil Germans who participated in this vast ghastly operation because they thought it right, for the sake of the country, for the sake of winning the war, and ultimately because the Jews were termites and undermined all possibilities of the good life for Germans, for which they saw themselves as working. But that leaves out the question of your category – criminals who commit crimes because they are crimes, evil people who do evil because it is evil, etc. – Milton’s Satan, Byronic heroes [*words missing: ‘to understand these?’*] is not to forgive. That I have always firmly believed. I remember Austin saying to me, if we do not forgive ourselves, as we often don’t, why should we forgive others? Very typical of him. And of course one had to condemn, fight against, evil; whether one understands it or not does not

make it in any way more tolerable. Then why does one do it? Certainly the common core is not the same as the human horizon – that is your central question, and I am happy to be able to answer it as best I can.

The common horizon is entirely to do with intelligibility – you are right – whereas the common core is central human values: with some variety, it has to be admitted, but at any rate in one's own case simply the values which (*a*) can be regarded as among the central human values, historically speaking – a great many places, a great many periods, etc. – though by no means all of them, not exhaustive; and (*b*) what one is prepared to fight for, in some cases die for, whether or not they may alter, or were rejected by others, and so on. So in the end it boils down to one's own personal horizon, which is necessarily part of some social horizon of not only the contemporary culture to which one belongs but something extended into the past as well. But in the final analysis simply what one is committed to, and prepared to argue for, and prepared to explain in terms of the common beliefs, the common core. That is the only alternative, for me, to objective morality – Kant, Mill, the Churches etc., which I do not accept. But when Stuart Hampshire talks about 'absolute evil', I am not sure that I understand that either: I know perfectly well what he means. It cannot do any harm to try and understand the most horrible acts and the most horrible people and the most horrible human characteristics – original sin, in which, like Freud, I certainly believe. Although that is not one's reason for rejecting, or denouncing, or fighting against, or making war upon those who seem to one destructive of all that one believes in, because one believes in it not just subjectively but as part of some ongoing human outlook – or, at any rate, a particular path in it with which one feels oneself identified. I mean that even when one says 'I can understand why Torquemada murdered people – given his circumstances, his beliefs, the general outlook of Spanish Catholics, the desire to save souls, etc. etc. etc. – one need not condemn it as totally irrational or unintelligible ...' – the kind of thing that Bishop Creighton argued against Lord Acton. This does not mean that one is not allowed to regard it as wholly evil, not just because of the bad character of the Inquisitors but because of its intrinsic badness – even if the motives can be explained in human terms – in other words, to be condemned in the name of

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values which are as absolute as anything one can make in a non-absolute, empirical world, i.e. again many places, many times, many people – in other words, I am with Acton against Creighton: understand whatever you can, but this is no reason for not condemning, even if you can imagine yourself as perpetrating these evils if you were a different person in a different place under different influences, etc. [...]

*On a draft typescript of Lukes's 'The Singular and the Plural: On the Distinctive Liberalism of Isaiah Berlin', Social Research 61 (1994), 687–718:*

TO STEVEN LUKES

28 February 1994

p. 5, para. 2: 'He is not interested [in linking metaphysics and] morals [(though he holds that morals are generally based on metaphysics in the sense that moral and political judgements are grounded in views of the nature of man and the universe), or philosophy, politics, and economics, or the biological and social sciences in some overall conception of evolution]', and that I do not seek to 'elaborate a set of principles [with wide application across different intellectual disciplines or spheres of] social life'. To this, I say yes and no. I do think that value judgements, whether in morals or politics, are as a rule founded on metaphysics, i.e. on the general picture of the world of a given thinker; and I say this from time to time. Let me elaborate. The two central themes – principles – which as you know go through everything I write, sometimes too repetitively, are (a) the incommensurable and incompatibility of some ultimate values, and (b), connected with this, not merely the impossibility but the conceptual incoherence of the idea of a perfect harmony which, at any rate in principle, rational policies can create. But this does rest on metaphysical suppositions, and would not work without them: it implies that there is a basic harmonious structure of the universe. For some, e.g. the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century, it is a static harmony – Nature, Dame Nature, Mistress Nature – which, if it is rationally studied, would tell humanity how to live. For others, it is an evolving process, subject to unalterable laws, as unalterable as

those of the physical world, spiritual for Hegel, material for Marx, the understanding of which can – and, for those who believe in the inexorable laws of progress, will – lead to a rational, harmonious society. For thinkers of this kind, especially social thinkers, all conflict, failure, misery – everything that is unsatisfactory about social change – is due in the end to human error or ignorance or blindness: for some thinkers, incurable, for others, capable of being overcome, which could lead to sane, rational human life, individual and social. This rests on the belief that to all genuine questions there must be true answers, only one true answer for each; and that all these truths are compatible, or even mutually entailing (the former is an obvious logical truth: one truth cannot conflict with another); and therefore, if we knew them all and acted accordingly, which, if we are rational, we cannot help doing, once we know what there is in the world and how it is organised and moves – and therefore must lead to the ideal. Some thinkers may think that we shall never answer these questions because we are weak or because of original sin, which makes us imperfect and our knowledge incapable of perfection, etc., and there are the conflicts of zoological nature, due in their turn to some kind of curable imperfections of biological organisms. So in principle the lion *can* be conditioned to lie with the lamb; but in short, it is all due to human defects – ignorance, stupidity, irrational fears, greed, what Spinoza called negative emotions, which reason cannot dissipate. This is certainly a doctrine of what there is and how things are and change – a *metaphysical* vision – an ontology which I reject on empirical grounds. Hence my admiration for William James, Hume, Herzen etc.; I do not believe that, whatever may be the case with the external world – physical or biological nature or even certain provinces of physiology and psychology – that social change obeys inexorable laws, and, according to most of those who do believe this, is therefore moving, no doubt through much chaos, pain and disaster, to a final harmonious solution. That is the ‘final solution’, which I used in *total* unconsciousness, or forgetfulness, that the Nazis used this formula (you are wrong about this!) – it is equally applicable to Communism or even, perhaps, socialism, or the great world religions, provided that Paradise is where all these things are resolved.

In other words, I do believe, strongly, that ethical and political views are grounded in a view of the nature of man and the

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universe, and that is metaphysics when it involves a priori necessities, inevitabilities, a basic pattern against which no empirical discoveries can offend – what Popper has against Marx, and for that matter against Freud too, with less reason. These doctrines cannot be refuted by empirical evidence; they are in some sense basic and objective and given to whatever special faculty – sometimes called reason, at other times, faith – it is which reveals this fundamental structure. The crooked timber, and many other empirical factors, seem to me to render this implausible, quite apart from my general rejection of a priori knowledge, although I believe that there are what might be called basic human categories – frameworks in which men in many lands, at many times, in many circumstances have lived and could not help living: all ultimately de facto, empirical, but so large, so wide, so ancient, so ubiquitous, that they could reasonably be called categories. But in principle they could change. That is my faith, and it is an empirical, anti-metaphysical vision, I suppose, which I share with Hume and the entire tradition of British empiricism, as against what I might broadly call continental metaphysics. Existentialism is akin to this, but Sartre in the end betrayed it.

p. 21, para. 2. I am not guilty of relativism. My entire doctrine of pluralism is meant to preclude that. It was Spengler who thought of cultures as mutually exclusive – bubbles between which there were no windows, so that one culture could literally not understand another. I believe the opposite of this. If it were true, we wouldn't understand a word of Plato or the Bible. No, I believe, of course, that there is your 'the shared background [of criteria of truth and falsity and standards of reasoning but also of common concepts and dispositions,] beliefs and practices'. Unless there is enough common ground, we could not understand cultures remote in time and space, even to the extent to which we claim to understand them. But understanding is not acceptance. I can detest the Homeric world, as Vico nearly did, but I can understand it, and understand its achievements – even when I reject them because they conflict with the values that I or my society or my culture pursue, and are, indeed, often founded on. That is empathy, *Einfühlung* – Vico, Herder. Hence your last

paragraph on this page<sup>10</sup> seems to me wholly incorrect: ‘objectively valid’, ‘reasonable’, ‘rationally justifiable’ are *not* purely internal to a given cultural whole, otherwise no understanding could occur, we could not write the history of the classical past or China or the like with any degree of understanding of their values, quite apart from whether we approve of them or accept them. I am not, believe me, guilty of ethnocentric relativism. Herder seems to me right, if perhaps slightly exaggerating, when he says that every culture has its own centre of gravity – there are many flowers which constitute the garden – but that does not mean that one culture cannot reject those of another culture in terms of its own values, while understanding what it is that makes societies unlike itself hold the values that it does, because of circumstances or traditions or ideas, shallow or profound, which rule such societies. In other words, pluralism means capacity for understanding how one might still be a human being and yet be different from, and perhaps very repellent to, oneself and one’s culture, etc. Ultimate ends and values differ, but one culture, faith etc. can ‘enter’, to use Vico’s expression, the mind of another.

p. 22. Of course monist theories can inspire benevolent and beneficent conduct – like the Utilitarians, who tried to cure human ills. But if one accepts utilitarianism absolutely, then it is difficult to see, on a utilitarian basis, why minorities should not be slaughtered in order to produce the greatest happiness of the greatest number (whatever that may mean). If happiness is the only criterion, then all the other values go by the board – however tolerant, humane etc. utilitarianism may seek to be; I am only saying that pushed to its proper, logical conclusion it *can* lead to what seem to me to be monstrosities. If it doesn’t, this is because, without admitting or perhaps realising it, the utilitarians in fact follow other principles too: most people are like that! After all,

<sup>10</sup> ‘Furthermore, if value pluralism were to take a relativist turn, then this would break any link with liberal tolerance. For if what is “objectively valid,” and “reasonable,” and “rationally justifiable” were always internal to given cultural “wholes”, then no culture could ever be criticised for mistreating another or indeed its own members. Moreover, far from *exhibiting* liberal tolerance, such relativism is, in effect, a concealed form of ethnocentrism, denying “them” access to “our” standards of objectivity, reasonableness, and justification.’

utilitarianism plus the Marxist theory of history, or plus some other metaphysical doctrine, can lead to Stalinism – not to Fascism, because for Fascists happiness is not a central value, if one at all.

That is why I think that Wolin, whom you mention, after writing a brilliant account of political thought in the past, got entangled in his own funny anarchist monism, and in the end came to nothing, poor man.

I agree that pluralism<sup>11</sup> may not lead to liberal conclusions, but pluralism does lead to liberalism. Pluralists *must* accept variety: understanding – communication – must lead to toleration, which monism can preclude: even monistic liberalism. When you speak of ‘fanatical one-sidedness’ etc.,<sup>12</sup> I simply don’t follow what it is you mean. As for Carl Schmidt, his ‘pluralism’, although it throws a great deal of genuine light on what the Romantics believed (I learnt a good deal from him), is a form of arbitrary irrationalism; it does not rest upon commonly accepted values which underlie even differing cultural systems; and leads to genuine relativism – I believe in my doctrine and you believe in yours, and I kill you before you kill me – which is the very essence of anti-liberalism and, if properly understood, anti-pluralism too. I may be unable to convert real fanatics; but if the people I am against are rational at all, I can try to persuade even in terms of their values.

p. 24, para. 2, line 1: ‘unchanging?’<sup>13</sup> ‘Evolving’ will do, provided there are family likenesses, in Wittgenstein’s sense, of which I spoke above. What Wittgenstein said is that portrait A resembles portrait B, B resembles C, C resembles D – no single *common* feature can be abstracted, but there is a continuity of likeness: apart from omnipresent central characteristics. Greeks are like Romans, Chinese are like Afghans, Afghans like Persians, then Armenians, then Russians and so to us all. But certainly I believe that there is a human nature, and not simply one damned nature after another. You are right to emphasise that I believe that communication is the essence of pluralism, that to be human is to

<sup>11</sup> Corrected to ‘liberalism’, surely in error.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Nor is it clear that the pluralism he so eloquently defends leads naturally to liberal conclusions. Why should it not lead to fanatical one-sidedness on the ground that a comprehensive or neutral or objective view of all sides is in any case unavailable?’

<sup>13</sup> ‘Berlin is, therefore, prepared to contemplate the existence of an unchanging human nature.’

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be able in some measure to communicate, that communication (I daresay in not a strictly Habermas sense) is the presupposition both of pluralism and of being human – at least, that is what I certainly believe.

p. 25, the first quotation:<sup>14</sup> that is indeed what I believe, and a very good central quotation, for which I am grateful.

p. 26, at the top: that is a perfectly correct report of my views – values conflict, but compromises and trade-offs are possible, in most cases though not in all; where they are literally impossible, for ideological or any other reason, conflict is unavoidable. But I don't personally believe that it is ever unavoidable. The excellent Amos Oz recently, in a brilliant lecture on the attitude of the Jews to God, and finally in answering questions about Jews and Arabs, said there are two ways of ending tragedies: the Shakespearian, and the Chekhovian – in the first, everybody in the end is dead; in Chekhov they are all miserable, but alive. The second is preferable, and the first is never unavoidable – that is the degree of his and my optimism, but still it is something. Romantics, Fascists, fanatics of every kind, reject compromise as bare-faced betrayal of one's values – hence the view that a duel is nobler than some feeble attempt to slur over the differences. I believe the exact opposite of this, and so, I suspect, do you. [...]

TO JONATHAN DANCY

28 March 1995

[Headington House]

Dear Dancy,

Thank you for your letter about the conflict of values. I am afraid that your account of my views is somewhat at variance with what I believe myself to hold. Let me begin.

You speak of an 'anecdote' as being a 'refreshing change'. The story I tell is so horrible that there is something totally

<sup>14</sup> 'There is a finite variety of values and attitudes, some of which one society, some another, have made their own, attitudes and values which members of other societies may admire or condemn (in the light of their own value-systems) but can always, if they are sufficiently imaginative and try hard enough, contrive to understand – that is, see to be intelligible ends of life for human beings situated as these men were.' CTH2 82–3.



inappropriate in calling it an ‘anecdote’. You say that I tell it as a true story, which implies that though I tell it so it may not be – but I can assure you that the trials in Tel-Aviv have revealed the full horrible story in all its gruesome details. So the story is true and not merely, as you take it to be, an example of an extreme case of the conflict of what you call disvalues. Before we get on to the substance of this letter, let me continue a little with the ‘anecdote’. You say that the Gestapo chief tells the Jewish leader that the Jews are to be transported ‘somewhere where their chances of survival are not good’. By this time the Jews of Hungary, where this episode occurred (as well as many similar ones in other countries), knew perfectly well where people were being transported to: the news about the gas ovens was by this time widely known even in the West. So it is very likely that this phrase describes what was known. Nor is it necessary to talk about the Gestapo’s proposal doing it efficiently and having no need to spend time on this matter, etc. All he can have said to the Jewish leader is: ‘If you do what we tell you it will save us time in compiling a list of all the Jews in the area.’ There is no need to add ‘We can construct this list for ourselves’: this is quite obvious – though you can leave it in if you wish. ‘You would prefer not to help ...’ is a little too mild – it should be ‘If you do not wish to do this ...’ or something of that kind. Nor, at the end of the story, ‘... including if you like yourself’ – this is not necessary. The man could not care less whether he included himself or not. A week to make up his mind is unrealistically long; twenty-four hours is more like it.

I ought to add that this story is not, for me, a case of a conflict of ‘disvalues’, but quite a different paradigm. My point when telling this story is that there are situations so extreme, and indeed appalling, that ordinary moral categories are not fitted to cope with such cases; and that therefore the attempt to judge the conduct of the Hungarian Jewish leader as being right or wrong does not arise. We are in no position to pass judgement on behaviour in a situation so unspeakable; ordinary moral criteria do not apply to situations so far outside the range of normal experience. I said all this because I was against Hannah Arendt and others like her, who criticised German, Hungarian etc. Jews for not standing up more to the Nazis, and letting themselves be taken like sheep to the slaughter. This seemed to me not only wildly unrealistic, but a piece of inexcusable arrogance on the part of people living in

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safety, daring to dictate what people in that situation should or should not have done. No doubt there are religious doctrines or ideologies which do dictate a clear answer to this kind of dilemma: but if they exist, I do not share them. I am concerned [with] the normal ethical views of the great majority of mankind, in many times and places.

I ought to add that your statement that, by taking the first option, the man ‘ensured that fifty more people end up dead’ is not accurate; the most we can say is ‘... makes it likely that all the Jews will be killed’. In the same paragraph, the idea of bequeathing the problem to someone else is not relevant: whatever he chooses, there are more than ‘respectable’ reasons for his choice; the reason for suicide is to avoid a guilty conscience – in fact, to avoid having to face the problem at all.

Now let me come to the substance itself. [...] You speak of adopting certain values or disvalues. But this is not a realistic piece of moral psychology. We simply find that these values are such that we can, being what we are and what we believe, live our lives by them. I do not believe that we ‘adopt’ values, as if a variety of them were offered to us in some ethical shop window, and we decide on reflection that we propose to try and realise no. 3 or no. 7. We are born with certain values as a result of all the forces that create us – tradition, education, the views of the people we live among, the books we read, our own thoughts, etc. etc. Of course we can reject any of them, and of course we can imagine different ones – the latter must be true of the first people to conceive Jewish, Christian or Muslim, or Communist or Fascist, values, or the first aesthetes, or pacifists or internationalists of whatever. Novelty occurs. ‘Adoption’ is too weak a word for what I mean; where people are converted to a set of values, they do not simply ‘adopt’ – nor yet when they pursue conventional or traditional values at the cost of their lives. It would be idle to ask a normal person ‘When exactly did you adopt your outlook?’ We begin with some kind of constellation of values and disvalues, some kind of outlook, and can alter it as a result of thought or imagination, or some shock of recognition or crisis in our or other people’s lives. This is not selection or adoption: we live our lives in the light of a constellation of values, perhaps uncritically accepted (but not ‘adopted’), or perhaps critically – emerging as a result of reflection or self-criticism or the like. You speak as if we simply decide to

choose this or that value out of those available to us, and this is surely psychologically not true. If you go to a wise friend for advice on which of two conflicting values to realise, in what does his wisdom consist? Not in knowing more facts than you do (which may or may not be so), nor because he is a specialist in values (whatever that may mean – not much to me), but because he is capable of showing you [that] ‘Value X is much more like the horizon of your existing values, of life as you wish to live it, than is value Y.’ He points out that following value X is likely to lead to consequences which [do] not collide with something you seek – or collide less than if you realise value Y.

[...] you speak of ‘the tension or conflict ... intrinsic aspect of value’. I do not do that. Some values conflict, but their essence does not include, as an intrinsic aspect, the fact that they do – indeed, I do not quite know what that would mean.

[...] ‘... the more elaborate ... of this type’. ‘Elaborate selection’ does not enter my thoughts. ‘This gives us some incentive ... simple’. This is not how one proceeds, at least according to me. I do not stand before a table of values and say to myself, ‘I think I’d better reduce the choice to a few, because that will avoid conflict rather more than if my mind wanders over all seventeen values.’ What I see before me I see before me, whether it is inherited or invented by me, many or few; and I realise those values which cohere with the already existing constellation in the light of which I live – I do not simply pounce on a value or two and add it to the collection, and then discover that it conflicts with something else. Hence I do not accept your ‘we each make our own selection’ [...], or the penultimate line, ‘if someone does select ...’. Again, the first two lines of the last para. on this page: I do not think this at all, I think many values can be harmonious with each other; if they do conflict, that faces me with the need for choice. But I don’t regard the mere existence of more than one value as automatically involving conflict and choices – otherwise our lives would be inexhaustibly tragic, scarcely capable of being lived at all. That is not my experience or my view.

[...] I do not hold that a ‘reasonable selection of values’ (whatever that means) must involve conflicting values. I may be lucky enough to live by harmonious values or ends of life, as fanatics do, without being ‘unreasonable’. Whether the values clash or not is a matter of personal or collective experience – it is not

inevitable in either case, though of course, highly probable in most cases. The rest of the paragraph I simply do not follow: could you make it simpler for my benefit? It may be my fault that I cannot follow it, but what can I do? The same, to some degree, applies to your footnote on pp. 3-4 – I can understand the beginning, but not what is meant by ‘not than can understand the beginning, but not what is meant by ‘not than we could ... originally had’. What could we otherwise have got? – one value at the total expense of the other? And what does ‘originally’ mean? Do I begin with one value and then wait for it to be attacked by another? That seems to me to be untrue to experience. However, I may have misunderstood you again.

p. 5., para 1. Again, I do not understand. You are speaking about minimising the conflict (I take it). What is it that is not being answered ‘by saying that any reasonable selection of values would involve conflict (that’s as may be), but only avoided?’

In the same paragraph you say that the criteria, if there are any, must be value-free. This I do not understand at all. I do not, as you know, believe in ‘selection’ in any case; but let us allow that. Then, if there are any criteria which I use in deciding which values to follow, which to sacrifice, between which to find some compromise, these cannot be value-free, in my view. I do not start from a neutral blank: the values I seek to fulfil always have something to do with some antecedent outlook or constellation of values, which would certainly influence me in choosing between two conflicting values – otherwise the criterion would have to be some unintelligible abstraction, not something that anyone can possibly apply. I conclude that no value-free criterion is possible; and in fact in most cases we do not apply criteria at all, we simply choose – not without reasons, but not by applying some universal criterion, which, as you rightly say, would have to be everyone’s if it is to be value-free and universal. I think this speculation on your part does not help to illuminate the mind of someone troubled about which of two conflicting values to pursue; it certainly doesn’t mine.

You say on the same page, ‘More follows, but I have suppressed it’: perhaps you shouldn’t have suppressed it; perhaps it would throw some of the light for which I ask.

However that may be, I have done my best to say what I think, and I can only apologise for going on and on in this way,

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particularly in a way which you can surely not fail to find unsatisfactory. You did ask for my views and these are they. If there is something I have misunderstood, or could have understood if you had put it differently, do let me know. I apologise again for all this critical stuff.

Yours,  
Isaiah

TO JONATHAN DANCY

25 April 1995

[Headington House]

Dear Dancy,

[...]

2. You ask me whether it makes any philosophical difference if the story I told is truth or fiction. I do tell it as truth, but I do not think that is essential. I do not think philosophy need concern itself with empirical facts: examples is all it needs, and therefore fiction is quite sufficient. As you rightly say, all that the actual truth can do is to throw light on how human beings can behave, and in fact did behave – and that no doubt is relevant to such moral psychology as we inevitably bring into moral discussion. The fact that what happened was so horrible I do not think is relevant, at any rate to the topic we are discussing.

3. You are perfectly right in thinking that my reason for saying that you cannot judge the behaviour of the Hungarian Jew is that the situation is so unspeakable that ordinary moral criteria do not apply. Of course, he had to decide what to do, and not to take a decision in such a case is also a decision. It is possible, as you say, that there may be cases where judgement is possible though advice is out of place. Of course we can ourselves reach some kind of judgement, e.g. ‘What would I have done/should [I] have done in his place?’; but that does not make it more appropriate to give advice, because we cannot condemn – and therefore cannot really praise – whatever decision he takes. We have to say that whatever he does is right – no possible alternative he can choose can be described as wrong. But if, as you suggest, he might ask for advice (although I do not think that he would think that moral categories had ceased to apply – he may certainly be agonised as to the right

choice, and that is a strictly moral problem for him), what I wanted to say is that whatever I might think I could or should have done in this situation is not relevant. I can give him no reason for choosing this alternative rather than that. That is what I mean when I say the ordinary moral categories don't apply: there is no reason for or against any of the alternatives when the cases are as extreme as that.

There can be a gloss on this. A pious Jew, and perhaps a pious Christian, could say to himself, 'I am forbidden by God to do anything that will cost the life of innocent people. Therefore I cannot choose to rescue myself and fifty others if that means the inevitable death of the others. Their death may be inevitable in any case, but to *choose* who shall live and who shall die is God's privilege. I have no right to play this part: therefore I advise the man either to commit suicide or take either of the two alternatives'.

I can certainly preach that to him if I am a clergyman or a rabbi. I can, but I think that would be pretty unspeakable. I think this because I believe that absolute rules, as in this case, no matter what the consequences, can lead to terrible results; and therefore I don't want to contemplate the state of mind [I should have] if I were a fanatical believer. But I concede that if I were one I could give advice, and could pass judgement; and all I say against it would then be falsified.

4. It follows that I believe that I could certainly tell the man, 'In your shoes I would act thus and thus.' But that seems to me intolerable arrogance on my part, the implication being that if he were to follow one of the remaining possibilities – not the one that I would choose – there would be something to be said against it, and that is to discriminate between possible actions on his part; and that is what I mean by saying that we are in no position to pass moral judgement in hideous situations of this kind.

I do hope that this is clear – I am not sure that it is. Consequently, your conclusion that there can be a situation in which I realise that only one possibility can be realised at the expense of the others, so that moral categories still apply, is different in kind from the appalling case in which they do not.

You think that a life in which choices need not be made, when everything harmonises because none of the values conflict with each other, is 'not very probable'. I am not so sure. Neither

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fanatics nor very simpleminded people who act upon instinct or without much thought can be in a position where conflicts arise: but perhaps you don't agree. You speculate on the possibility that all the alternatives are absolutely wrong, though the inevitable need to choose one of them (including the possibility of *not* choosing) can still be described as morally wrong. I think a situation of that kind is rather like my dreadful case, and, once again, moral categories do not apply. But I think you simply disagree with this, and on this I think we might agree to disagree. I think that no choice can be condemned if outside ordinary moral categories: you think that there is a case where all choices can be condemned even though there is no escaping them. That, I think, is a genuine disagreement.

5. You ask the very interesting question (particularly interesting to me) about what is the difference between recognising values and committing oneself to them. I certainly think there is a vast difference. Anyone who reads biographies or histories must know that other persons in other situations at other times and places pursue certain values – avoid certain courses of action – which one can understand, that is, recognise as genuine human values, the kind of values the pursuit of which does not dehumanise people. Of course I can take the position that I commit myself to none of these, although I can intuitively enter into what it is like to pursue them – and to that extent I can display a certain sympathy for values which may be repellent to me personally. That is my case for what I call moral pluralism – where one recognises values to which one does not commit oneself as true values, but not values for me – but not as the kind of values which I simply cannot understand anyone I can communicate with as following, values which somehow make communication between me and the person who pursues them literally impossible, because I cannot see how one can be in a state of mind where these things are values to him as my values are to me. Indeed, I can go so far as to admire a culture which pursues values which I recognise as values though they are emphatically not mine – the values of the Homeric world, of the Italian Renaissance, etc. You see what I mean?

I think this answers the rest of your point on this. I complained that you were speaking as if we select certain values from what you call a menu, and think that we find ourselves pursuing certain values which it may be we have not examined, and then are in a

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position to reject some of them, modify them, acquire others, etc. You ask: What about the values we recognise as not being our own? Do we not inherit a whole collection of such values as pursued by others, or capable of being pursued by others, but not pursued by us? Can I recognise something as a value and not commit myself to it? I think I have answered this. The fact that others, whether my contemporaries or persons in the past or other places, pursue values which I fully recognise as the kind of values that human beings can pursue, and have pursued – this certainly does not commit me to give reasons about why I do not pursue them. Of course there are thinkers, among them I expect myself, who think that natural solidarity with the society into which I was born causes me – or, rather, is the reason for which I am likely to pursue certain values, because these are the values of what the Vienna positivists called my ‘cultural circle’. That is true; but it still does not mean that the fact that I recognise certain values – say, the creation of musical compositions of which I am incapable – as being values worth pursuing means that these are among my values. They are not: they are the values of the composer. I may respect them (in this particular case I am prepared to favour them, assist with their realisation, praise them, celebrate them, but they are not mine). And then there are the values which I abhor, which nevertheless are in the same position as the musical composition – pursuable, pursued, but not by me. Is that paradoxical?

I think you think that to recognise something as a value can be to say that I ought to seek to realise it. That is precisely what I deny – some yes, some not. Conversion means the replacing of one horizon of values with another – how that happens, why, is another question. If that happens, it certainly has nothing to do with recognising certain values and committing myself to them. I can recognise the values of Buddhism, or Fascism, or anything you like; and I can no doubt in principle be capable of being converted to them; but to recognise them is totally different from being converted to them, from setting myself – or thinking I ought to set myself – to realise them.

Will this do?

Now let me briefly answer your last three questions.

1. Moral criteria do not apply to extreme tragic cases, because nothing that you choose can properly be described as right or



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wrong. The criteria for discriminating between the choices have been left behind.

2. We do recognise values that we do not take as ours. That is why I can understand how the Romans lived or (in my case) how Communists live and behave.

3. I have answered this. To give the Jewish leader advice is to indicate that one course of action is preferable to the others. Even if we think this, it seems to me dreadful arrogance to pontificate in such a case. He must decide for himself, and not be bothered with advice which may increase his agony.

Now let me offer you a *bonne bouche* of a case where whatever you do may be to some extent morally wrong (again, this is a true story, though it doesn't need to be). I was told by a British Intelligence officer that towards the end of the war he went to see a French Resistance unit which had captured a French traitor who had worked for the Gestapo. He wished to interrogate him, and the Resistance people said, 'Certainly you can interrogate him as much as you wish, but whatever happens he dies tomorrow morning. That is a decision which, no matter what the result of your conversation may be, we shall not change.' The British officer goes to interrogate the young traitor, probably eighteen or nineteen years old, in order to find out facts which may enable him to save victims of the Gestapo. The young man says, 'Why should I talk to you? If you can guarantee that I shall not be executed, then I will talk; but if you cannot, why should I?' What should the British officer have done? He did not tell me what he had done. But it was clear to me that he was troubled by the thought that if he had obeyed his duty as an intelligence officer, and indeed perhaps his duty as a human being, he would perhaps have promised the young man that he would be spared (in order to get the information which might save lives). But if he did that – and perhaps he did – then he would realise that the last thought on the part of the young traitor was that he had been lied to. I don't know what he did – I had the impression that he did lie, telling the young man that he would be spared, and for the rest of his life was troubled by the thought of the young man's last minutes. If he had chosen otherwise he might have been more troubled by the thought of having failed to obtain life-saving information. It may be clear what one should do, but if he was a sensitive human being he would never say to himself afterwards, 'I did what was right. I

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have no remorse. I would do it again if I had to.' That is just to indicate tragic possibilities of a rather different kind. [...]

Yours sincerely,  
Isaiah Berlin

TO MICHAEL WALZER

18 March 1996

[...] I am glad you agree about my two senses of liberty; and when you say that my description of 'the more basic sense' doesn't answer the question whether this has any moral or political force – e.g. slavery – I think the reason for universal abhorrence of slavery, in the end, comes to people feeling reduced nearly to not-quite-persons, the drugged or hypnotised man – being used as chattels, being ordered about without their desires or opinions being sought, knocking people this way and that way. All this does bring them a little too close to a kind of basic non-humanity, which people have a natural and universal wish to resist. I wish I knew what 'rights' meant. But if it means, as I think it does, that it is what, if a thing is good and you have an interest in it, you can claim [...]; if it is bad and you have an interest in it, you are not allowed to claim it; then the wish to remove the chains of the slave is a desire to acquire what you regard as minimal attributes of what, in your opinion, constitutes a human being. At least, that is how I see it. But perhaps I am quibbling, perhaps you are right, perhaps there is a gap between being a slave (with some liberties) and having none at all. But I think the first is an approach to the second.

With regard to your second point, you are absolutely right and I don't need to answer it. Liberalism as a mental attitude is certainly what one is talking about, as well as doctrinal definitions of liberty. And that it is not one of the many things, it is something more basic – I am sure that is right, and I ought to have said so, sometime, and I am glad you did. [...]

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TO CHARLES BLATTBERG

19 March 1996

[...] 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 recategorised 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 reconsideration 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 overarching 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

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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. [...]

TO CHARLES BLATTBERG

25 April 1996

[...] I still hold on to 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,

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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. [...]

TO TIM GARTON ASH

12 July 1996

[...] Whatever Schumpeter may have felt himself, I do not know of any case – apart from him, myself and possibly you – of people who, dedicated to causes, values, principles etc., consciously allow that they might change. The German Jews of whom you speak were totally devoted to Germany, in the simplest sense – that is what made the situation tragicomic: tragic in the case of the victims, comic in the case of the unbendingly pro-German Jews in France, America, England etc., whom I have met (and was very sorry for their pathetic moral and political condition). I wonder if any pro-Turkish Armenians, pro-German Jews, etc. in fact returned to these countries at any stage. I rather think not. The present patriotic Jews are a new lot, and equally pathetic in my view.

But you are right – people who are prepared to give up their lives for their cause cannot at that moment say 'But of course, it may all be different in the future.' I doubt, if I were ever faced with a moral crisis where my life was at risk, if I should at that moment be able to say, 'But of course, I may think differently in ten years' time'. [...]