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Isaiah Berlin
Theory, History and Expression

Reiji Matsumoto

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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Isaiah Berlin: Theory, History and Expression

Reiji Matsumoto

WHAT IS Isaiah Berlin's most important work? There is no single text analogous to John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. If we were to choose several, the candidates would be too numerous. The most widely known is *Two Concepts of Liberty*, his inaugural lecture for the Chichele chair of Social and Political Theory at Oxford, which is comparatively short. In response to the wide discussion it provoked, Berlin revised and enriched the original text and wrote a number of related essays. It would be insufficient to discuss Berlin's liberalism by referring only to *Four Essays on Liberty*, which includes that lecture. Value pluralism, many scholars agree, is central to Berlin's philosophy, but there is no explicit text which formulates and explains it theoretically. On the other hand, his studies on political thinkers from Machiavelli to Herzen are closely related to this philosophical enquiry. In this sense, his studies on the Counter-Enlightenment – essays on Vico, Hamann, Herder and the German Romantics – belong to the mainstream of his work in intellectual history. But these monographs, which extend to the last major article to be published, on Joseph de Maistre, deal with a wide variety of topics, and each of them makes its own separate and significant mark. Since his first book on Karl Marx, Berlin has written a good many essays on various figures in the history of ideas, and all of them are so attractive that one could not pass over even a brief piece. A number of essays on Russian thought and thinkers, in particular, make a comprehensive whole of peculiar value.

Apart from these academic works, Berlin has written many essays describing the significant figures he met during his life – writers, artists, scholars and politicians – or recollecting his own personal experiences. Not only does he speak of great statesmen such as Churchill or Franklin D. Roosevelt, he also gives a vivid account of certain critical moments of history to which he himself was a witness: one thinks in particular of the moving narrative of

risky meetings with Pasternak and Akhmatova in Moscow and Leningrad immediately after the war, and a letter recounting the episode of receiving Shostakovich in Oxford. Reading these writings together makes us feel we are vicariously experiencing the tragic history of the twentieth century. The literary genius with which he sketches vivid portraits of persons of his acquaintance also gives special charm to his works in the history of ideas. Among intellectual historians and political philosophers there are some scholars whose writings, however theoretically profound, fail to convey the personalities of the thinkers under discussion. Berlin's works are the exact opposite.

Berlin's writings are very numerous, ranging over many different fields, and every piece is interesting. As a result, it is difficult to identify a limited number of principal works and to discuss the whole systematically. One plausible interpretative strategy is a kind of biographical reading, in which we understand his works in the light of his own historical experiences and intellectual growth. A few long interviews he granted in his later years, and Michael Ignatieff's biography – abundant in first-hand information – are invaluable for such a reading. These biographical works remind us that all Berlin's multifarious writings are in one way or another connected with his own intellectual and collective identity. Recognition of the importance of intellectual identity and cultural belonging, the importance of which he learnt from Herder, is a persistent concern of Berlin's works in intellectual history, and gives a unique twist to his liberalism too. In spite of his defence of 'negative liberty', he recognises the significance of nationalism, and gives serious consideration to the problems it creates. It is this concern about collective identity that leads him to take identity politics seriously and to seek dialogue with multiculturalists.

As for his own cultural identity, he says that it is threefold: Russian, Jewish and English (or would it be more accurate to say Oxonian?). His attachment to Russian culture and literature is apparent in his historical studies on writers from Herzen through Turgenev to Tolstoy, as well as in his admiration for contemporary poets such as Pasternak and Akhmatova. His Jewish identity

explains much about his Zionist commitment, but he also discusses various Jewish writers and politicians in Europe. Indeed, it is impossible to read, for example, ‘Benjamin Disraeli, Karl Marx, and the Search for Identity’ without thinking of Berlin’s own Jewish identity. This issue, however, is difficult for us non-Christian gentiles to understand fully. Do Berlin’s quarrels with Hannah Arendt or Leo Strauss have something to do with the difference in their Jewish identities? In his last years, it seems, Berlin found it difficult to reconcile his liberal creed with his Zionist commitment in the teeth of the embarrassing condition of Israeli politics. The controversial Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell, known for his studies on the French origins of Fascist ideology, wrote a thick book about the Counter-Enlightenment¹ in which he argues, challenging Berlin’s view of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, that it is not the former but the latter that provides intellectual weapons for totalitarianism. From his own standpoint of seeking reconciliation with Palestinians on the ground, in the face of the growing menace of terrorist attacks, he observes that living safely at Oxford allowed Berlin to be a liberal Zionist. His highly critical attitude towards Berlin is unusual. The book was translated into English, but, perhaps because of Sternhell’s sometimes inaccurate reading and hasty argument, did not seem to be favourably received in the English-speaking academic world, where Berlin’s authority is not often disputed.

There are many studies – books and articles – on Berlin written in English, most of which are sympathetic but not comprehensive, and seem to try to assimilate Berlin to the author’s own standpoint in contemporary academic debates. John Gray’s book² examines Berlin’s notions of pluralism and liberalism, defining his liberalism as agonistic, and gives the impression of making Berlin a liberal minimalist. Whether pro or con, the major part of the literature on Berlin concentrates on his philosophy, especially the notion of

¹ *Les anti-Lumières: Du XVIIIe siècle à la guerre froide* (2006); translated by David Maisel as *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition* (2010).

² *Isaiah Berlin* (1995).

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liberty, and rarely tackles his work in intellectual history. In order fully to discuss his contribution to the history of ideas, does one need to be as good a historian of ideas as Berlin? In any case, it is rare when reading the literature on Berlin to come across a text more interesting than Berlin's own work. Would it be impolite to Berlin scholars to say that listening to a short piece by Mozart is more entertaining than reading a good thesis on the composer?

Translated by the author and Henry Hardy from the Japanese original in *Isaiah Berlin*, a special issue of *Shisō [Thought]*, no. 1166 (2021 no. 6: June). Reiji Matsumoto is an Emeritus Professor at Waseda University in Tokyo.

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