



## 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 published selection. In cases where another part of the relevant letter has been published, the reference 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 collection 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 the published volume 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

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,

<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).

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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 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, 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

<sup>2</sup> 'Slope'.

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?

*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

<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.

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,

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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'. 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 34. 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 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 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,

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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 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

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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

[...]

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

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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



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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?

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



































































































































