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## The Singular and the Plural

Isaiah Berlin is a challenging thinker. The challenge of his thought – and, more particularly, as I shall argue, of his *way* of thinking – has not, I believe, diminished over the last half-century but, on the contrary, only grown in force and relevance. In this article, I shall try to identify what, in my view, that challenge amounts to.

It is not, in the first place, a question of *difficulty*, either of thought or of expression. To the contrary, Berlin's writings are exceptionally accessible to an exceptionally wide audience. As a writer and as a lecturer, he always displayed a rare gift for communicating at several levels to a wide range of different publics: from specialist scholars, historians and philosophers to the general reader or listener or lover of literature with a taste for ideas. His prose is never abstruse or even abstract: ideas are always attributed to persons in identifiable times and places. As Joseph Brodsky has remarked, 'others' lives are this man's forte' (the 'two most interesting things in this world', Brodsky adds, being 'gossip and metaphysics').<sup>1</sup> The ideas and arguments about which Berlin writes are, as Bernard Williams has observed,<sup>2</sup> always *someone's*, developed in response to some specific, and specified, situation.

Consider, for example, his account of the origins of nationalism, in reaction to the French Enlightenment, as 'a vision in the heads of a small group of German poets and critics':

writers who felt most acutely displaced by the social transformation through which Germany, and in particular Prussia, was passing under the westernising

reforms of Frederick the Great. Barred from all real power, unable to fit themselves into the bureaucratic organisation which was imposed on traditional ways of life, acutely sensitive to the incompatibility of their basically Christian, Protestant, moralistic outlook with the scientific temper of the French Enlightenment, harried by the petty despotism of two hundred princes, the most gifted and independent among them responded to the undermining of their world, which had begun with the humiliation inflicted upon their grandfathers by the armies of Louis XIV, by a growing revolt. They contrasted the depth and poetry of the German tradition, with its capacity for fitful but authentic insights into the inexhaustible, inexpressible variety of the life of the spirit, with the shallow materialism, the utilitarianism, and the thin, dehumanised shadow play of the worlds of the French thinkers. This is the root of the romantic movement, which in Germany, at any rate, celebrated the collective will, untrammelled by rules which men could discover by rational methods, the spiritual life of the people in whose activity – or impersonal will – creative individuals could participate, but which they could not observe or describe. The conception of the political life of the nation as the expression of this collective will is the essence of political romanticism – that is, nationalism.<sup>3</sup>

This passage illustrates well several aspects of Berlin's prose that help explain its accessibility: clarity, precision of historical reference, the characterising of complex ideas while looking for their 'root' and their 'essence', the real effort to convey the 'world from within' (how did these particular Germans see the French Enlightenment?) in a way that makes the acceptance of the ideas in question seem as plausible as possible (why did it appear like *that* to *them*?). It also illustrates its literary qualities, which Brodsky found to be 'typically Russian': 'his piling up of subordinate clauses, his digressions and questions, the cadences of his prose which resembled the sardonic eloquence of the best of nineteenth-century Russian fiction'.<sup>4</sup> Berlin himself records that Tolstoy and 'other Russian writers, both novelists and social thinkers, of the mid-nineteenth century . . . did much to shape my outlook'.<sup>5</sup>

The accessibility of Berlin's writing is not, however, bought at the price of vulgarization or simplification. He invites the reader or listener to consider ideas or arguments or world views, the scholarly debates over which he has pondered and mastered but rarely displays. He quotes sparsely, and he does not analyse texts in detail, preferring to present overall interpretations of thinkers, in part as faithful and sympathetic reporter, in part as their contemporary interlocutor, in part as advocate, to the reader, of his own position, drawn from the consideration of their world views. Almost always Berlin's essays (and all his writings are essays,

ave the life of Marx<sup>6</sup> and the recently-published study of Hamann<sup>7</sup>) are reflections on some large perennial question, the sort of question on which most of us reflect at some time or other. Is there an overall pattern to history and can it be known, as Saint-Simon and Comte, Hegel and Marx maintained? Is there, as the thinkers of the Enlightenment were convinced, 'a movement, however tortuous, from ignorance to knowledge, from mythical thought and childish fantasies to perception of reality face to face, to knowledge of true goals, true values as well as truths of fact'?<sup>8</sup> Are 'the positive values in which men have believed' ultimately compatible or are conflicts of values 'an intrinsic, irremovable element in human life'?<sup>9</sup> Is human nature much the same in all times and places, as Hume believed and Vico denied? Are the methods of the natural sciences applicable with equal success to the fields of ethics, politics and human relationships in general, as positivists maintain and Vico, once more, denied? If not, why not? His essays draw the reader into the discussion of such questions by making the ways in which certain thinkers of particular interest to him addressed and sought to answer them come alive.

That they come alive in his pages, and that they used to do so in the lecture hall, is indisputable. Why is this? In what does his peculiar gift for making ideas vivid consist? I think part of the answer, at least, is given by the very mixing of perspectives delineated above: Berlin as interpreter, interlocutor and thinker. As interpreter, he possesses to a remarkable degree that faculty that Vico called *fantasia* – the ability to *enter* into other world views, to 'hear men's voices, to conjecture (on the basis of such evidence as we can gather) what may have been their experience, their forms of expression, their values, outlook, aims, ways of living'.<sup>10</sup> His interpretations usually focus on the central animating vision of the thinker in question, rather than on the logic of his arguments, and on thinkers for whom this is the most revealing approach – for arguments are often (but of course not always) 'only the outworks – the defensive weapons against real and possible objections on the part of actual and potential critics and opponents'.<sup>11</sup> As interlocutor, he extends his *fantasia* to picturing how contemporaries understood and responded to the thinkers under discussion. In this way, his approach to some extent incorporates the context of intelligibility on which Professor Quentin Skinner lays such stress: but an exclusive focus on this makes the trans-contextual relevance and continuing power of ideas unintelligible. Berlin as thinker in his own right is concerned to marshal the ideas he discusses into the service of a larger argument, or set of arguments, that is presently alive. Often, as in his essays on John Stuart Mill<sup>12</sup> and Georges Sorel,<sup>13</sup> his interpretation

conveys where the thinker under discussion would stand on the issues of our own day or, as in the essay on Joseph de Maistre, how his thought strikes a disturbing contemporary note. For Berlin the history of ideas is never merely historical but at the same time an exploration of their strengths and weaknesses and, as he writes in his essay on Sorel, of 'the relevance of these ideas to our time'.<sup>14</sup>

Yet the challenge his thought presents is not, in the second place, that of an ambitious, all-embracing *system* of thought. He is not a systematic thinker. 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. He does not seek to elaborate a set of principles with wide application across different intellectual disciplines or spheres of social life. He is not what is these days called a 'foundationalist'. He is not after firmly based principles or axioms from which moral and political conclusions can be derived, or which can provide a criterion for ranking values or a metric by means of which they can be compared. He does not even present a 'theory' of liberty or of equality (the two values about which he has written explicitly), or of the relations between them, for our times.

Joseph Brodsky, who had read Berlin in the Soviet Union and first met him in the early 1970s, saw this absence of system as intrinsic to the very idea of liberty. 'In the realm I was from,' he wrote, "philosophy" was by and large a foul word and entailed the notion of a system. What was good about *Four Essays on Liberty* was that it advanced none, since "liberty" and "system" are antonyms.<sup>15</sup> But this goes too far and misses what is distinctive of Berlin's liberalism. Many of the great liberal thinkers have exhibited, in varying degrees, the *esprit de système* that Berlin so notably lacks – Kant, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill and, in our own day, Friedrich von Hayek, Sir Karl Popper and, in a different way, John Rawls.

Berlin's positive views, to which we will come in due course, are, it is true, inimical to such system-building and his favourite liberal heroes – Benjamin Constant, Alexis de Tocqueville, Alexander Herzen – are none of them builders of systems. As for Kant, Berlin was fond of quoting his phrase: 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made',<sup>16</sup> preferring its message to the overall message of the work from which it comes, *The Idea for a Universal History in a Cosmopolitan Perspective*, in which Kant writes of 'the hidden plan of nature' being to bring into existence 'an internally and externally perfected political constitution'

and civil unification is characterized by means of an exactly opposite image:

as trees in a wood which seek to deprive each other of air and sunlight are forced to strive upwards and so achieve a beautiful straight growth; while those that spread their branches at will in isolated freedom grow stunted, tilted and crooked.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, the John Stuart Mill he admired is not the inheritor, transmitter and modifier of one of the most intellectually powerful of such systems, still potent in our own day, namely, utilitarianism. Mill's thought, he writes 'runs directly counter to traditional – that is, eighteenth-century – utilitarianism, which rests on the view that there existed an unalterable nature of things, and answers to social, as to other, problems can, at least in principle, be scientifically discovered once and for all'.<sup>18</sup> Mill, he writes,

broke with the pseudo-scientific model, inherited from the classical world and the age of reason, of a determined human nature, endowed at all times, everywhere, with the same unaltering needs, emotions, motives, responding differently only to differences of situation and stimulus, or evolving according to some unaltering pattern. For these he substituted (not altogether consciously) the image of man as creative, incapable of self-completion, and therefore never wholly predictable: fallible, a complex combination of opposites, some reconcilable, others incapable of being resolved or harmonised, unable to cease from his search for truth, happiness, novelty, freedom, but with no guarantee, theological, logical or scientific, of being able to attain them: a free, imperfect being, capable of determining his own destiny in circumstances favourable to his reason and gifts.<sup>19</sup>

Berlin's Mill, in short, is a lapsed utilitarian, driven by a

passionate belief that men are made human by their capacity for choice – choice of evil and good equally. Fallibility, the right to err, as a corollary of the capacity for self-improvement, distrust of symmetry and finality as enemies of freedom – these are the principles which Mill never abandons. He is acutely aware of the many-sidedness of the truth and of the irreducible complexity of life, which rules out the very possibility of any simple solution, or the idea of a final answer to any concrete problem.<sup>20</sup>

But it was certainly Alexander Herzen – who by the middle of the nineteenth century had become 'the acknowledged leader of all that was generous, enlightened, civilised, humane in Russia'<sup>21</sup> – whose liberalism most closely foreshadows and, as he acknowledged, influenced his own, with its distrust and scepticism of closed, general intellectual systems and

its fear of the consequences of their being believed in. Thus Berlin writes of Herzen's 'deep distrust (something that most of his allies did not share) of all general formulas as such, of the programmes and battle-cries of all the political parties, of the great, official historical goals – progress, liberty, equality, national unity, historic rights, human solidarity – principles and slogans in the name of which men have been, and doubtless would soon again be, violated and slaughtered, and their forms of life condemned and destroyed'.<sup>22</sup> Herzen, he writes, was sceptical about 'the meaning and value of abstract ideals as such, in contrast with the short-term, immediate goals of identifiable living individuals', of 'the degree to which human beings can be transformed' and, more deeply still, about 'whether such changes, even if they were achieved by intelligent and fearless revolutionaries or reformers, ideal images of whom floated before the eyes of his westernising friends in Russia, would in fact lead to a juster and freer order, or on the contrary to the rule of new masters over new slaves'.<sup>23</sup> Herzen came to fear that 'the ideals and watchwords of politics turn out, on examination, to be empty formulas in the name of which devout fanatics happily slaughter hecatombs of their fellows'.<sup>24</sup> Herzen believed that 'remote ends were a dream, that faith in them was a fatal illusion; that to sacrifice the present or the immediate and foreseeable future to these distant ends must always lead to cruel and futile forms of human sacrifice'. Though Herzen believed in 'reason, scientific methods, individual action, empirically discovered truths', he tended to suspect that faith in general formulas, laws, prescription in human affairs was an attempt, sometimes catastrophic, always irrational, to escape from the uncertainty and unpredictable variety of life to the false security of our own symmetrical fantasies.<sup>25</sup>

In such passages as these, Berlin was speaking, through the mouths of his subjects, against what was the dominant intellectual and political system of our time, to which many of his students, readers and critics were, in different ways and to different degrees, attracted, namely, marxism. Many of the notes struck were familiar. They were sounded by many other contemporary liberals – notably, Sir Karl Popper, Sidney Hook, Jacob Talmon, Raymond Aron, Norberto Bobbio. Yet Berlin's voice was always distinctive. It was never stridently and aggressively polemical, or complacently celebratory of the 'end of ideology', in the manner of the anti-communist liberals in the United States (often ex-marxists themselves). It spoke for the most part about and through thinkers of the past, but never crudely or manipulatively, blaming this or that thinker for the totalitarian horrors that were to come. Berlin was always a more nuanced

and subtle interpreter than Popper or Talmon. Moreover, readers and listeners were left free to see parallels and analogies in patterns of thought where they would. Finally, unlike Aron but like Bobbio (and Mill and Herzen), Berlin was always unmistakably, if watchfully and cautiously, a man of the left, an enthusiast for the New Deal and a supporter of the postwar Welfare State, concerned to warn his friends and allies and students just where certain ways and patterns of thought could lead. He raised his voice against raised voices: against intolerance, strident simplifications, overarching schemes that promise cognitive and moral certainties, purporting both to interpret and to change the world – or, indeed, to preserve it. He agreed with Herzen that we ‘have marvelled enough at the deep, abstract wisdom of nature and history; it is time to realise that nature and history are full of the accidental and senseless, of muddle and bungling’.<sup>26</sup>

The challenge of Berlin’s thought is not, therefore, in the third place, that it defends any particular set of political principles or project or programme. It is not a defence of the ‘market order’ à la Hayek, or of ‘piecemeal social engineering’ à la Popper, or of the ‘minimal state’ à la Nozick, or of a ‘well-ordered society’, more or less social-democratic and liberal, governed by the Difference Principle, à la Rawls, or of ‘complex equality’ with demarcated spheres of justice, à la Walzer. It offers no particular view of constitutionalism or representative democracy or political economy. It provides neither an explanatory theory of, nor a normative model for, a well-functioning liberal order. Nor is it an argument against ‘rationalism in politics’, the deployment of rational principles in political life as such, an invocation to pursue the ‘intimations of traditions’ à la Dakeshott. Nor does it conclude from the alleged failure of the Enlightenment project of justifying morality that we are in for ‘coming ages of barbarism and darkness’ à la MacIntyre. Nor, finally, despite its distrust, scepticism and fear of overarching cognitive and moral claims, is it a forerunner of postmodernist, relativist positions that purport to deconstruct and undermine the very appeal to reason and reasonableness in the discussion of the central questions of political theory.

Berlin’s challenge consists, rather, in his lifelong effort to defend and advocate a certain *way of thinking* about moral and political questions, rather than a particular explanatory or normative theory, a set of what Collingwood called ‘absolute presuppositions’ that govern how we are to understand the world, rather than a distinctive set of propositions about it.<sup>27</sup> Such presuppositions are, as Collingwood insisted, not true or right or based on evidence or demonstrable, as propositions are, but rather

form part of the framework within which we judge which propositions are true or right or convincing. They are, so to speak, the master assumptions that, for a given culture and period, guide expectations, determining which sorts of propositions and theories we are prepared to count as ‘true’ or ‘right’. The ‘absolute presuppositions of any given society, at any given phase of its history, form a structure which is subject to “strains”’ and if ‘the strains are too great, the structure collapses and is replaced by another’.<sup>28</sup> Most of Berlin’s writings have been devoted to furthering the task of undermining one such framework or structure with a view to replacing it by another.

The framework under attack he variously calls ‘monism’, the ‘*philosophia perennis*’,<sup>29</sup> the ‘old perennial belief in the possibility of realising ultimate harmony’<sup>30</sup> the ‘platonic ideal’ that ‘as in the sciences, all genuine questions must have one true answer and one only, all the rest being necessary errors, . . . that there must be a dependable path towards the discovery of these truths, . . . [and] that the true answers, when found, must necessarily be compatible with one another and form a single whole, for one truth cannot be incompatible with another – that we know *a priori*’.<sup>31</sup> Applied to morals and politics, according to Berlin, this amounts to a utopian belief in ‘the discoverability and harmony of objectively true ends, true for all men, at all times and places’.<sup>32</sup> The *locus classicus* in Berlin’s *œuvre* where this doctrine is most eloquently described and attacked is the last section of his lecture ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’. It is, he claims there, responsible more than any other belief, for ‘the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals’, including ‘liberty itself, which demands the sacrifice of individuals for the freedom of society’. It is the belief that ‘somewhere in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or in the mind of an individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the simple heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a final solution’. This ancient faith, he writes, rests on ‘the conviction that all positive values in which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible, and perhaps even entail one another’. And, to illustrate the Enlightenment’s commitment to this belief he cites Condorcet, ‘one of the best men who ever lived’, who wrote that ‘Nature binds truth, happiness and virtue together as by an indissoluble chain’, and spoke similarly of liberty, equality and justice.<sup>33</sup>

Against monism, thus understood, he defends and advocates ‘pluralism’ – not in the political scientist’s or sociologist’s senses, but a ‘pluralism of values’: the belief that in the world of ordinary experience we are ‘faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally

absolute, the realisation of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others'; that 'the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other', so that 'the possibility of conflict – and of tragedy – can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social' and 'the necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition'; and that human goals are 'not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another'. For,

in the end, men choose between ultimate values; they choose as they do, because their life and thought are determined by fundamental categories and concepts that are, at any rate over long stretches of time and space, a part of their being and thought and sense of their own identity, part of what makes them human.<sup>34</sup>

Berlin derives this conception of pluralism from a number of sources. Indeed, much of his very best writing consists in his interpretations of thinkers whom he sees as its precursors and articulators. It was, he tells us, the reading of Machiavelli that planted in his mind 'the realisation, which came as something of a shock, that not all the supreme values pursued by mankind now and in the past were necessarily compatible with one another'.<sup>35</sup> The 'originality' of Machiavelli, according to Berlin, was to have juxtaposed two 'moral outlooks', 'systems of value' and 'sets of virtues' – the Christian and the pagan – and seen that they were 'not merely in practice, but in principle incompatible',<sup>36</sup> thereby planting 'a permanent question mark in the path of posterity' stemming from his 'recognition that ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other, that entire systems of value may come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration ... as part of the normal human situation'.<sup>37</sup>

From Vico's *La scienza nuova* (which Collingwood urged him to read) and other unsystematic works he derived a similar message. What he valued in Vico was

his insistence on the plurality of cultures and the consequently fallacious character of the idea that there is one and only one structure of reality which the enlightened philosopher can see as it truly is ... men ask different questions of the universe, and their answers are shaped accordingly; such questions, and the symbols or acts that express them, alter or become obsolete in the course of cultural development; to understand the answers one must understand the questions that preoccupy an age or a culture; they are not constant nor necessarily more profound because they resemble our own more than others

that are less familiar to us. Vico's relativity went further than Montesquieu's. If his view was correct, it was subversive of the very notion of absolute truths and of a perfect society founded on them, nor merely in practice but in principle.<sup>38</sup>

In Herder, the great inspirer of cultural nationalism and eventually of political nationalism, this view was deepened and radicalised – more particularly the earlier Herder, fired by 'a relativistic passion for the individual essence and flavour of each culture'. For Herder, who rejected the absolute criteria of progress then fashionable among the *philosophes* in Paris,

no culture is a mere means towards another; every human achievement, every human society is to be judged by its own internal standards ... there is a plurality of incommensurable cultures. To belong to a given community, to be connected with its members by indissoluble and impalpable ties of common language, historical memory, habit, tradition and feeling, is a basic human need no less natural than for food and drink or security or procreation. One nation can understand and sympathise with the institutions of another only because it knows how much its own mean to itself. Cosmopolitanism is the shedding of all that makes one most human, most oneself.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed it is striking how this central, lifelong theme is central to his readings of virtually all the thinkers about whom he has written. Thus he notes the 'continuous dialectic' in Montesquieu's thought between absolute values based in permanent human interests and a sense of their relativity to time and place in a concrete situation, and he commends his 'very clear perception of the fact that no degree of knowledge, or of skill or of logical power, can produce automatic solutions of social problems, of a final and universal kind'.<sup>40</sup> He is interested in David Hume chiefly because of his 'peculiar relationship' with the German opponents of the Enlightenment, notably Hamann and Jacobi, for whom Hume's scepticism had removed 'the *a priori* bonds needed to guarantee the indestructible validity of the rationalist edifice'.<sup>41</sup> His abiding and intense interest in these founding fathers of Romanticism and in the Counter-Enlightenment as a whole is motivated by the same set of concerns.

What drives all these studies is the urge to pinpoint the weaknesses of the monism of the Enlightenment by consulting the thoughts of its most dangerous and implacable enemies and to discover the sources of pluralism in all their exuberant variety, sometimes in surprising places, and to trace the extreme and sometimes bizarre lengths to which it has been taken and the consequences to which it has led.

Thus he sees Joseph de Maistre, not just as an extreme Catholic

reactionary, but as 'an unyielding adversary of all that the *lumières* of the eighteenth century had stood for – rationalism, individualism, liberal compromise and secular enlightenment',<sup>42</sup> who sounded 'what is perhaps the earliest note of the militant anti-rational Fascism of modern times'<sup>43</sup> but whose world is 'much more realistic and more ferocious than that of the romantics'<sup>44</sup> and whose genius consisted in 'the depth and the accuracy of his insight into the darker, less regarded, but decisive factors in social and political behaviour'.<sup>45</sup> For Maistre, Nature was a 'scene of brutality, pain and chaos' governed by an unfathomable divine purpose and Reason but a 'flickering' light.<sup>46</sup> His originality was to point out 'the persistence and extent of irrational instinct, the power of faith, the force of blind tradition, the wilful ignorance about their human material of the progressives – the idealistic social scientists, the bold political and economic planners, the passionate believers in technocracy'; with 'much exaggeration and perverse delight' he underlined 'that the desire to immolate oneself, to suffer, to prostrate oneself before authority, indeed before superior power, no matter whence it comes, and the desire to dominate, to exert authority, to pursue power for its own sake – that these were forces at least as strong as the desire for peace, prosperity, liberty, justice, happiness, equality'.<sup>47</sup>

His study of Sorel, similarly, focuses on a penetrating critic of 'shallow optimism, characteristic of the shallow eighteenth century', a thinker in revolt against 'the rationalist ideal of frictionless contentment in a harmonious social system in which all ultimate questions are reduced to technical problems, soluble by appropriate techniques'.<sup>48</sup> He believed that myths could 'direct energies and inspire action', enabling 'free moral agents . . . collectively to resist and create and mould the world to their will' – a doctrine that led him to emphasise 'the power of the irrational in human thought and action'.<sup>49</sup> Erratic and inconstant in his politics, ending up an admirer of both Lenin and Mussolini, Sorel, like Maistre, rejected the assumption that 'reality was a harmonious whole',<sup>50</sup> but, unlike him, believed that 'to impose form on the chaos that we find in the world of nature and the world of thought – that is the end of both art and science and belongs to the essence of man as such'.<sup>51</sup> An 'eccentric visionary, a penetrating and cruel critic of the vices of parliamentary democracy and bourgeois humanitarianism', Sorel believed, throughout all the twists and turns of his career, in 'absolute moral ends that are independent of any dialectical or other historical pattern, and in the possibility, in conditions which men can themselves create, of realising these ends by the concerted power of the free and deliberate collective

will',<sup>52</sup> thereby feeding the 'anti-intellectual and anti-Enlightenment stream in the European radical tradition', with his 'hatred of democracy, the bourgeois republic, and above all the rational outlook and liberal values of the intelligentsia'.<sup>53</sup>

It is, however, to Romanticism, above all German Romanticism, that Berlin attributes the major role in the formulation and propagation of value pluralism, notably in the studies of Herder, in the small volume about Hamann, and in his various essays on Romanticism. To Herder, as we have seen, he assigns the discovery of 'a plurality of incommensurable cultures'. But it was Johann Georg Hamann, according to Berlin, who lit the 'fuse' which 'set off the great romantic revolt, the denial that there was an objective order, a *verum natura*, whether factual or normative, from which all knowledge and all values stemmed, and by which all action could be tested'.<sup>54</sup> Hamann's 'profoundly irrationalist spiritual vision', his 'obscurantist particularism and denigration of systematic thought' were accompanied, however, by 'inspired insights', defending 'the inarticulate, the mystical, the demonic, the dark reaches and mysterious depths':<sup>55</sup> his view of the world was of 'an unorderable succession of episodes, each carrying its value in itself, intelligible only by direct experience, a "living through" this experience, unintelligible – dead – when it is reported by others'.<sup>56</sup> Hamann remained 'blind to the worst abuses of the regime in which he lived', seeing only 'the vices of the "great simplifiers" who were seeking to destroy living men and women in the name of hollow abstractions – ideals like reason, progress, liberty or equality'.<sup>57</sup> His 'hatred and blind irrationalism', Berlin acknowledges,

have fed the stream that has led to social and political irrationalism, particularly in Germany, in our own century, and has made for obscurantism, a revelling in darkness, the discrediting of that appeal to rational discussion in terms of principles intelligible to most men which alone can lead to an increase in knowledge, the creation of conditions for free co-operative action based on acceptance of common ideals, and the promotion of the only type of progress that has ever deserved this name.<sup>58</sup>

As this last passage makes very clear, Berlin's challenge amounts to an extraordinarily paradoxical argument. For it would seem that it was the Enlightenment – the major modern source of 'the only type of progress that has ever deserved this name' and the origin of the very idea of the 'left' – that espoused monism – the 'one belief, more than any other, . . . responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals'. And, apparently, it was the Counter-Enlightenment –

whose principal figures variously foreshadowed 'the militant anti-rational Fascism of modern times' and fed the streams of anti-intellectual radicalism and 'social and political irrationalism, particularly in Germany' – that gave birth to value pluralism, that was part of the 'great mutation in western thought and feeling that took place in the eighteenth century' which made toleration into an 'intrinsic value' and shaped 'the concepts of liberty and human rights as they are discussed today'.<sup>59</sup> It was the rationalist *philosophes*, committed to optimism and cosmopolitanism, whose belief in the reconcilability of all human values in a single, harmonious unity would ultimately lead to the dangerous illusion of the 'possibility of a final solution' – the prospect that mankind could be made 'just and happy and creative and harmonious for ever', for which no price could be too high to pay.<sup>60</sup> And it was theocratic reactionaries and particularist, often irrationalist romantic thinkers, contemptuous of shallow optimism and cosmopolitan ideals, whose 'deep and radical revolt against the central tradition of western thought' and acute sensitivity to the 'virtues of diversity' in life and thought would turn out to lay the foundations of 'modern liberal culture'.<sup>61</sup>

This is a very striking argument, whose audacity is only reinforced by the repeated (if unconscious or forgetful) use of the Nazi phrase 'final solution' in relation to Enlightenment rationalism. But how convincing is it? To answer this, we need, I believe, to look more closely at its various component claims and at the strength of the links between them. What exactly, according to Berlin, does value pluralism assert that monism denies? And how exactly does the latter pose dangers from which the former offers protection?

There are several distinct elements that go to make up pluralism of values, as Berlin repeatedly describes it. In the first place, there are several features of values that are worth distinguishing. They are *plural*, not forms or derivatives of a single value or fixed set of values. Thus freedom must not be identified with 'equality, justice, happiness, knowledge, love, creation, and other ends that men seek for their own sakes'.<sup>62</sup> They can be *incompatible*: that is, not jointly realizable in a single life or a single society; there are 'logical, psychological and sociological limits on what range of values an individual can seriously respect in one life, or one society respect in the lives of various of its citizens'.<sup>63</sup> They can be *incomparable*: there may be no relevant respect in which one value can be judged in relation to another, even if *de facto* an individual or a culture must choose between them. And they can be *incommensurable*: there may be no scale or metric, whether cardinal or ordinal, by reference to which one may be judged

higher or lower or equal to the other, no 'common standard in terms of which to rank them'.<sup>64</sup>

In the second place, Berlin's value pluralism stresses the place of values within social or cultural wholes. They are *integrated* in such wholes. Ideals, he writes, 'belong to the form of life which generates them . . . values – ends – live and die with the social wholes of which they form an intrinsic part'.<sup>65</sup>

In the third place, and closely related to this, he sometimes has suggested that this integration has a *relativistic* implication: that values are not only culture-specific in fact, but that their validity is also culture-bound. Thus

Each 'collective individuality' is unique and has its own aims and standards, which will themselves inevitably be superseded by other goals and values – ethical, social and aesthetic. Each of these systems is objectively valid in its own day, in the course of 'Nature's long year' which brings all things to pass. All cultures are equal in the sight of God, each in its time and place.<sup>66</sup>

Finally, Berlin holds that the foregoing ideas together entail the *rejection of perfection*: the 'possibility, at least in principle, of universal, timeless solutions of problems of value'. A believer in pluralism will find 'the notion of the perfect civilisation in which the ideal human being realises his full potentialities' to be 'patently absurd: not merely difficult to formulate, or impossible to realise in practice, but incoherent and unintelligible'.<sup>67</sup>

Conversely, monists hold that the diverse goods human beings seek are forms of, or derive from, a single overarching good,<sup>68</sup> and that when they are not jointly realizable, they can be subject to a complete and consistent ordering – or, if they are 'moral utopians', monists may believe, as Marx and Engels did, that the incompatibility can be overcome by overcoming the conditions that generated it. (It is not clear whether monists must altogether deny the *plurality* and the frequent *incompatibility* of values, but they will insist that they can be ranked along some comprehensive scale that will guide choices between them, and thus they will deny their *incomparability* and certainly their *incommensurability*.) They attach little or no significance to the place of values within social or cultural wholes, believing rather that, since human nature is unaltering, human beings respond with the same needs, emotions and motives to different situations and circumstances. They are therefore absolutists, probably (though not necessarily) taking their own culture's standards to be of universal validity. And thus they are led to believe in

the possibility, at least in principle, of achieving perfection – of ‘universal, timeless solutions of problems of value’. Armed with these beliefs, monists are likely to become ‘single-minded’ – ‘ruthless fanatics,’ men possessed by an all-embracing coherent vision’ who ‘do not know the doubts and agonies of those who cannot wholly blind themselves to reality’. They are committed to the notion that ‘there must exist final objective answers to normative questions, truths that can be directly demonstrated or directly intuited, that it is in principle possible to discover a harmonious pattern in which all values are reconciled, and that it is towards this unique goal that we must make; that we can uncover some single central principle that shapes this vision, a principle which, once found, will govern our lives’.<sup>69</sup>

There are several problems with this argument, stated in this, its most extreme form. The different components of pluralism seem to be separable and not to entail one another. One can believe in the plurality and incompatibility of values without holding that some, or even any, are incomparable or incommensurable. And even if you believe that values are plural and can be incompatible, incomparable and incommensurable, you may not take cultural differences, let alone incommensurable ones, seriously.

There is, moreover, a difficulty about this last idea, as Berlin derives it from Vico and Herder. If one takes the idea that values inhere in cultural wholes too literally, one will all too easily misperceive the extent to which cultures are conglomerations – clusters or assemblages of heterogeneous elements with varying origins. Where do the boundaries between them lie? As I have repeatedly insisted in the first three chapters of this book, cultures are open systems, though of course the degree of their openness is variable. While differentiated one from another, all cultures are also, again to variable degrees, internally hybrid, fragmented and contested. The holistic Herderian picture was once the staple vision of anthropologists and it is still widely current in both popular and philosophers’ discourse, and among practitioners of identity politics. But it is no longer a commonplace among anthropologists: quite the contrary.<sup>70</sup>

More deeply, a very important question is: *how* do cultures differ? If they really do differ in ‘aims and standards’ that cover ‘ethical, social and aesthetic’ spheres of life in such a way that what is ‘objectively valid in its own day’ is always superseded, then we have come extremely close to the kind of cultural relativism that would render mutual intelligibility across cultures itself unintelligible: a conclusion Berlin explicitly rejects and which his whole doctrine of pluralism is intended to preclude. For how

could we even perceive, let alone make sense of, the cultural differences in beliefs and practices on which Berlin lays such stress, except against the shared background of criteria of truth and falsity and standards of reasoning, but also of common concepts and dispositions, beliefs and practices? How, to take a famous example, could we make sense of Herodotus’s story of Darius, King of Persia, who discovered that the Greeks at his court were horrified at the thought of eating their fathers’ dead bodies and that the tribe of the Callatae were no less horrified at the idea of burning them (while Darius knew that the *right* thing was to put them on high towers for the vultures to eat)? Only by presupposing the common notion of ‘honouring the dead’ that can take these different forms in different cultures.<sup>71</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 criticized 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.

Finally, there is the difficulty of the alleged dangers of monism from which pluralism, according to Berlin, can render us immune. One problem with this part of the argument is that it does lay exclusive stress on the role of ideas in accounting for the ‘slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals’. On the other hand, his *métier* is the analysis and history of ideas and his hypothesis that monism encourages or facilitates at least one kind of ruthless fanaticism certainly merits investigation. Obviously enough, he had Stalinist communism in mind. Yet it is not hard to think of resolute monists who have been very far from drawing the perfectionist conclusions he so abhors. Utilitarianism is, if anything is, a monist system of thought, and yet, if Professor Sheldon Wolin is right, the early Utilitarians were preoccupied with pain and scarcity and sought the minimization of suffering and anxiety.<sup>72</sup> And indeed, monism is, on Berlin’s own account, so broadly defined and so omnipresent (‘this ancient and almost universal belief, on which so much traditional thought and action and philosophical doctrine rests’) that it can hardly be surprising that it has led ‘at times’ to ‘absurdities in theory and barbarous consequences in practice’.<sup>73</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? Berlin has cited Max Weber's 'Politics as a Vocation' as a classic statement of it,<sup>74</sup> yet Weber's liberalism is far from unambiguous. Perhaps the most dramatic example of thoroughly value-pluralist or 'decisionist' anti-liberalism is the case of Carl Schmitt, the Nazi-sympathizing legal theorist, for whom politics reduces to the opposition between friend and foe and whose hostility to liberal democracy is probably unequalled by any other major modern thinker.

Berlin was, of course, alive to some of these problems and went some way to meeting them, in his writings and in interviews. One reason, I believe, why his central master-argument against monism and for pluralism seems vulnerable to them lies precisely in the interpretive method to which I alluded above, that renders his writings so vivid: the mixing of perspectives that leaves the reader sometimes unsure just *whose* voice he is hearing. Is he being addressed by, say, Hamann or Herder or Vico (as interpreted by Berlin or as Berlin understands his contemporaries to have interpreted him) or by Berlin, *in persona propria*? The very fact that the thinkers Berlin discusses were, for the most part, unaware of the difficulties I have outlined and that they would, indeed, in some instances have embraced them as virtues rather than counting them as objections, makes it all the more important to develop the case for pluralism and show its links with liberalism, in terms that are free of the peculiar obsessions of the Counter-Enlightenment, of which Berlin has painted such a graphic picture. The case for liberal pluralism needs to be made independently of pre-liberal and anti-liberal thinkers, however important may have been their contribution to making it possible.

As I have suggested, the elements of such a case are present in Berlin's writings. Consider, first, the priority of liberty, as an absolute, and universal, precondition for valuable lives being valuable. In his lecture 'Two Concepts of Liberty' Berlin already made it clear that the preservation of some minimum area of liberty is a value that is, in comparison with others, overriding. Moreover, it is not merely objectively compelling to 'us' because internal to 'our' culture. He writes there that 'some portion of human existence must remain independent of the sphere of social control'. Citing Constant, Jefferson, Burke, Paine and Mill, he argues that 'we must preserve a minimum area of personal freedom if we are not to "degrade or deny our nature"' – the minimum being that 'which a man cannot give up without offending against the essence of his human nature'. What, Berlin asks, is this essence and what are the standards which it entails? This, he answers, 'has been, and perhaps always will be, a

matter of infinite debate'.<sup>75</sup> The point is that he did not reject the question as absurd. As he remarks in the introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty*, 'to contract the area of human choice is to do harm to men in an intrinsic, Kantian, not merely utilitarian sense'.<sup>76</sup> And as he writes, with reference to Herzen, '... liberty – of actual individuals, in specific times and places – is an absolute value'.<sup>77</sup>

Berlin is, therefore, prepared to contemplate the existence of an unchanging human nature. Indeed, he does so explicitly, seeing it as a presupposition of mutual intelligibility, and its limits, across the variety of human groups, classes, churches, races or cultures. 'Incompatible [their] ends may be,' he writes, 'but their variety cannot be unlimited, for the nature of men, however various and subject to change, must possess some generic character if it is to be called human at all'.<sup>78</sup> Where the possibility of communication breaks down, we speak of 'derangement, of incomplete humanity'. He made a similar observation in an interview with the present writer: in the end there is 'something called human nature. It's modifiable, it takes different forms in different cultures but unless there were a human nature, the very notion of human beings would become unintelligible'.<sup>79</sup> In this sense, at least, mankind is, indeed, 'much the same in all times and places'.

Moreover, Berlin explicitly disavows relativism and indeed, in a paper published in 1980, criticized himself for having previously characterized Vico and Herder as relativists: both of them, he then made clear, 'insist on our need and ability to transcend the values of our own culture or nation or class, or those of whatever other windowless boxes some cultural relativists wish to confine us to'.<sup>80</sup> He took relativism to be the view that 'men's outlooks are unavoidably determined by forces of which they are often unaware'<sup>81</sup> and that these outlooks are 'subjective', only to be understood and judged from within. Pluralism, by contrast, he took to be the view that life affords 'a plurality of values, equally genuine, equally ultimate, above all equally objective; incapable, therefore, of being ordered in a timeless hierarchy, or judged in terms of one absolute standard.' There is, he writes,

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.<sup>82</sup>

Yet none of this prevents criticism within and across cultures:

Vico experiences no intellectual discomfort – nor need he do so – when he damns in absolute terms the social injustice and brutality of Homeric society. Herder is not being inconsistent when he denounces the great conquerors and destroyers of local cultures – Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne . . .<sup>83</sup>

The criticism in question may take the form of attempts at what he calls 'empirical enlightenment' – or one can 'reject a culture because one finds it morally or aesthetically repellent'.<sup>84</sup>

Furthermore, he did go some way to limiting the scope and range of such value pluralism. Thus, in the first place, he ventured the thought that 'more people in more countries at more times accept more common values than is often believed'.<sup>85</sup> Second, he suggested in his Agnelli lecture and further developed in the aforementioned interview<sup>86</sup> the thought that many conflicts between incompatible values, even where incommensurable, are capable of resolution through 'trade-offs', especially in the field of public policy, where the principle of resolution appealed to is utilitarian in a very broad sense<sup>87</sup> (minimizing suffering or not frustrating too many people's ultimate ends). The hard cases are dilemmas where both choices are morally binding, where there is no way of not doing wrong.

All this can, I suggest, be read as a counter-argument or sub-text that qualifies and limits the master-argument against monism and for pluralism delineated above. Its upshot is to begin to refine the value pluralism to which he remained committed in a way that is consonant with the liberalism he always defended and, more generally, with the values of the left. It is a pluralism intended to be compatible with the absolute, overriding and universal value of liberty, the existence of a common human nature, rational criticism and the tractability of many but not all value conflicts in public and private life. He certainly did not return an unambiguously affirmative answer to the questions with which he wrestled: do we truly believe that value judgments are not judgments at all, but arbitrary acts of self-commitment, that the sciences of man are irrelevant to political purposes, that anthropology, psychology, sociology can instruct us only about means, about techniques, that since values collide, there are no reasons for choosing one rather than another, so that if men, or groups of men, are possessed by different outlooks, that is the end of the matter, so that war between them is a more honourable proceeding (for those who believe in honour) than attempts to find an intermediate solution that fully satisfied the beliefs of neither side?

Like Herzen, he believed in 'reason, scientific methods, individual

action, empirically discovered truths'. Unlike Hamann, he believed in 'that appeal to rational discussion in terms of principles intelligible to most men which alone can lead to an increase in knowledge, the creation of conditions for free cooperative action based on conscious acceptance of common ideals, and the promotion of the only type of progress that has ever deserved this name'. The ultimate challenge of Berlin's thought is, in short, to develop and defend a pluralism of values that preserves the central message of the Enlightenment while firmly rejecting the nihilism and relativism of its past and present detractors.

### Notes

1. Joseph Brodsky, 'Isaiah Berlin: A Tribute', in Edna and Avishai Margalit, eds, *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration*, London: Hogarth, 1991, pp. 214, 211.
2. Introduction to Isaiah Berlin, *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy, London: Hogarth, 1978, p. xiii.
3. Isaiah Berlin, 'Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power', in his *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. with a bibliography by Henry Hardy, London: Hogarth, pp. 348–9.
4. Brodsky, *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration*, p. 212.
5. Isaiah Berlin, 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', in his *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. by Henry Hardy, London: John Murray, 1990, pp. 2–3.
6. Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, first published London 1939, fourth edn, London: Oxford University Press, 1978.
7. Isaiah Berlin, *The Magus of the North: J.G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*, London: John Murray, 1993.
8. Isaiah Berlin, 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', p. 7.
9. Isaiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in his *Four Essays on Liberty*, London: Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 167.
10. Isaiah Berlin, 'Giambattista Vico and Cultural History', in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, pp. 64–5.
11. Isaiah Berlin, 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism', in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, p. 161.
12. Isaiah Berlin, 'John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life', in his *Four Essays on Liberty*.
13. Isaiah Berlin, 'Georges Sorel', in *Against the Current*.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 296.
15. Brodsky, *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration*, p. 212.
16. See, for example, 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', p. 19.
17. Quoted and translated in Perry Anderson, 'The Pluralism of Isaiah Berlin', in his *A Zone of Engagement*, London: Verso, 1992, p. 234.
18. 'John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life', p. 182.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
21. Isaiah Berlin, 'Herzen and his Memoirs', in *Against the Current*, p. 202.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 208.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 211.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
27. See R.G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics*, Lanham: University Press of America, 1972, ch. V.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
29. 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', p. 8.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
32. Isaiah Berlin, 'The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will: The Revolt against the Myth of an Ideal World', in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, p. 211.
33. 'Two Concepts of Liberty', p. 167.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 168, 169, 171-2.
35. 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', p. 8.
36. Isaiah Berlin, 'The Originality of Machiavelli', in *Against the Current*, p. 69.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
38. Isaiah Berlin, 'The Counter-Enlightenment', in *Against the Current*, p. 6.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
40. Isaiah Berlin, 'Montesquieu', in *Against the Current*, p. 159.
41. Isaiah Berlin, 'Hume and German Anti-Rationalism', in *Against the Current*, p. 186.
42. 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism', p. 106.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 132, 122.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 166-7.
48. 'Georges Sorel', pp. 302, 332.
49. *Ibid.*, pp. 320, 323.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 302.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 299.
52. *Ibid.*, pp. 329-30.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 316.
54. *The Magus of the North*, pp. 122-3.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 121-2.
59. 'Nationalism. Past Neglect and Present Power', p. 333.
60. 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', p. 15.
61. 'The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will', p. 208.

62. Introduction *Four Essays on Liberty*, p. lviii.
63. Bernard Williams, introduction to *Concepts and Categories*, p. xvii.
64. Isaiah Berlin, 'Herder and the Enlightenment' in *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas*, London: Hogarth, 1976, p. 212.
65. *Ibid.*
66. *Ibid.*
67. *Ibid.*
68. Compare what Aristotle said against the Platonists: that 'of honour, wisdom and pleasure, the accounts are distinct and diverse. The good, therefore, is not some common element answering to one Idea.' Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1, 6, 1069b ed. and introduced by Sir David Ross, London: Oxford University Press, World Classics, 1954, pp. 9-10.
69. Introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty*, p. lv.
70. See Adam Kuper, *Culture: The Anthropologist's Account*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1999.
71. See chapter 1 of the present volume. For an excellent discussion of the implications of this story, see Midgley, *Can't We Make Moral Judgements?*
72. Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1961, pp. 314-31.
73. Introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty*, p. lvi.
74. *Ibid.*
75. 'Two Concepts of Liberty', pp. 126-7. See also Mack, *art. cit.*
76. Introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty*, p. lii.
77. Isaiah Berlin, 'Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty' in his *Russian Thinkers*, ed. by Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979, p. 87.
78. Isaiah Berlin, 'Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth Century European Thought' in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, p. 80.
79. 'Isaiah Berlin in conversation with Steven Lukes', *Salmagundi*, 120, Fall 1998, p. 105.
80. 'Alleged Relativism', p. 85.
81. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
82. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
83. *Ibid.*, pp. 86-7.
84. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
85. 'Isaiah Berlin in conversation with Steven Lukes', *Salmagundi*, 120, Fall 1998, 120, p. 119.
86. *Ibid.*, pp. 106ff.
87. Bentham wrote that 'the whole of government is but a connected series of ... sacrifices', cited in Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 326.