

CONFERENCIAS



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## **Isaiah Berlin's Inner Citadel**

**Intervención de Henry Hardy  
en las jornadas**

***Isaiah Berlin:  
Un liberal en perspectiva***

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One of Isaiah Berlin's most attractive personal qualities was his modesty. He always claimed that he was, as he put it, 'systematically over-estimated', though he often added, with a twinkle, 'Long may it continue!' In private he sometimes went further, saying that he felt like a terrible fraud, and feared that he would one day be exposed. To Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, he wrote in 1952: 'You must remember that unless told otherwise from time to time (or even all the time) I generally think that everything I do is superficial, worthless, glaringly shallow, and could not take in an idiot child.'<sup>1</sup>

I believe that he was perfectly sincere when he said these things; but also, of course, that he was mistaken. However, as I stand here now, I identify strongly with sentiments of this kind – and I, by contrast, am right to do so. Although I have had the great good fortune to play a role in the dissemination of Berlin's ideas over the last thirty years and more, this by itself does not enable or entitle me to be their interpreter. The relationship of an editor to his material is different from that of a critic, despite a certain overlap. A builder can perform his task well without being knowledgeable about architecture. Naturally I have formed a personal impression of the nature and importance of Berlin's ideas, and of course it is because I find these ideas so deeply sympathetic that I have spent most of my life in their company, but these autobiographical facts are largely incidental to my principal function. For this reason, there was a degree of rashness in inviting me to speak today, and there is a corresponding profound sense of inadequacy on my part.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter of 6 February 1952.

However, here I am, and I must try to communicate to you some of the thoughts in my mind ten years after Berlin's death.

The distinguished British academic Noel Annan – Lord Annan – was a close friend of Berlin's. In a book published in 1990, Annan summed up Berlin's work in these words: 'he seems to me to have written the truest and the most moving of all the interpretations of life that my own generation made'.<sup>2</sup> Another friend, the American historian George Kennan, wrote in 1958, in a personal letter to Berlin:

You have unquestionably the greatest critical mind of this generation – warmed with a charity that might well be the envy of 99 out of 100 Christians, and enriched with an ordering power so extraordinary that its mere operation is itself a creative act, affecting that which it touches & even changing it – just as scientific experimentation is said to alter, by its own action, the substance it is supposed to illuminate.<sup>3</sup>

Both these accolades are remarkably strongly worded, and what they say helps to explain why, when Berlin died, there was such an outpouring of personal affection and intellectual admiration; and why we are now assembled here to consider his legacy.

All the same, there is a certain paradox in the premise of this conference. Berlin was a sporadic, impressionistic essayist rather

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<sup>2</sup> Noel Annan, *Our Age* (London and New York, 1990), 378, as slightly amended at PSM xv. (Abbreviations of Berlin's works are those listed at <<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/abbrevs.html>>.)

<sup>3</sup> Letter of 16 June [1958].

than a careful, cumulative, exact analytical thinker. He wrote no systematic treatise synthesising his apparently disparate ideas into a single coherent structure; indeed, it would have been against the spirit of his enterprise to do so. He covered a remarkable range of subjects, and on almost any individual topic that he addressed it would be possible to identify a number of experts who are more scholarly, comprehensive, reliable, balanced – and usually duller. I sometimes think of the body of work he left us as an unfinished cathedral, built piecemeal over a long period in a number of different styles, without much regard for standard, official construction procedures or building regulations, and not adequately secured against the incursions of bad weather. No overall architectural plan was drawn up at the outset, no engineering studies were performed in order to assess the stresses and strains the structure would need to sustain, and it is not always clear why some parts of the building remain standing. There are cracks in the masonry, revealing structural faults that should be attended to if we are to protect the cathedral for future generations. Here we need a buttress, there we need to excavate the loose material inside a wall and replace it something more solid.

Despite these problems, the edifice has a magnificence and power all of its own that would be lost if we were to demolish it and try to build a better organised one from the ground up. Indeed, its degree of disorder is part of its rationale, and also of its appeal. Berlin embodied in his personality and expressed in his writing a complex and idiosyncratic, but compelling and persuasive, vision of the human predicament that sets him apart from other thinkers, and challenges us to explain why he has inspired so many to

endorse his stance and explore his somewhat disordered thought. It is this vision, unique to him when taken as a whole, that binds together the many strands of his life and writing, making a unity of what might otherwise be a loose amalgam of unrelated elements.

Berlin used to cite a passage from Bertrand Russell about this phenomenon, characteristically improving it in the telling. Here is one of his formulations: 'in order truly to understand the central doctrines of an original thinker, it is necessary, in the first place, to grasp the particular vision of the universe which lies at the heart of his thought, rather than attend to the logic of his arguments'. He adds that the 'essential purpose' of those who have such a vision is 'to expound an all-embracing conception of the world and man's place and experience within it'.<sup>4</sup>

Although Berlin would not have described himself as an original thinker, and although his all-embracing conception might be described, in another paradox, as hostility to all all-embracing conceptions, there is no doubt that these observations can be applied to his own work. His writing is informed by a deeply intuited vision of human life, which he expresses in different ways at different times, but which is always present in the background, and accessible to the patient and receptive reader. However, as soon as we try to describe this vision, the 'inner citadel'<sup>5</sup> of his thought, to use his own metaphor, we encounter a special difficulty, captured in a recent review of George Crowder's book on Berlin (which, incidentally, is by far the best introduction to his thought yet written). The perceptive reviewer puts it like this:

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<sup>4</sup> CTH 161.

<sup>5</sup> L 3, 246, 288.

Writing a commentary on the work of Isaiah Berlin is surely an intimidating prospect. Berlin is one of those thinkers of whom it can be said that you have to read him to appreciate the texture and meaning of his ideas. His ideas can be categorised and summarised, but their power resides in their articulation, in that distinctive style which has to be read to be felt in all its nuance and power of evocation.<sup>6</sup>

The truth of this judgement haunts anyone who tries to stand in for Berlin himself, and the first piece of advice to give to anyone who asks what all the fuss is about is 'Read Berlin.' Yet we cannot resist trying to 'see a pattern on the carpet', an ability Berlin admitted he himself possessed and deployed in his work.<sup>7</sup> He always said he was not interested enough in himself to want to write autobiography, but we can still ask what his approach might have yielded if he had turned it on himself.

It seems to me that Berlin's importance and appeal are made up of a number of separate but related components whose collective impact is greater than the sum of their parts. He is an irreducible *Gestalt*. Excellent books have been written about the most obvious constituents of this whole – about his own ideas on various topics, and about his account of the ideas of others (the two sometimes overlap) – and I can hardly summarise these here. Instead I want to make a few suggestions about what it is that lies beneath, and drives, his more explicit doctrines and descriptions.

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<sup>6</sup> Patrick Neal, 'Systematizing the Unsystematic', review of George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism*, *Review of Politics* 68 No 1 (February 2006), 137–40, at 137.

<sup>7</sup> Letter to Donald Hall, 11 December 1944, MSB 111/7–10, at 10.

These underlying forces are occasionally displayed directly, but they can also be sensed beneath the surface even when they are only implicit. They are first and foremost attitudes and qualities of character rather than theories, though they naturally have theoretical upshots.

One of Berlin's deepest and most pervasive attributes is something he seems to owe to his Russian roots – namely, the infectious zest and deep personal engagement with which he brings ideas to life, always conscious that ideas are given value and meaning primarily by their role in people's lives, not by their shapeliness on the page. These qualities set him apart from too many academic writers. He once defined an intellectual as 'a person who wants ideas to be as interesting as possible',<sup>8</sup> and by that standard he is an intellectual *par excellence*. No one was, and is, better intellectual company.

Equally fundamental, equally prior to the explicit substance of his thought, is his obvious wisdom – the sheer intelligence, soundness of judgement, perceptiveness, sanity and humanity that shines out from his work. When you read him, you feel in safe hands. I have been taken to task for saying this in the past, on the grounds that one should at all times preserve one's critical independence as a reader. This seems to me an unrealistic and impoverishing restriction: justified trust between people is a natural and fruitful bond in the intellectual as well as in the personal world. This is not to say that Berlin never got things wrong, was never confused, or that we should not press him when we are

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<sup>8</sup> CIB 24.

unconvinced. But it is to suggest that such instances are likely to be exceptions that prove the rule.

Next, when we read Berlin, we soon notice, and are attracted by, its largeness of conception. He took the whole human condition as his canvas, asking, in words he took from J. G. Fichte, what it is that mankind can, and should, 'be and do',<sup>9</sup> individually and collectively. He is of course very far from alone in adopting such a broad perspective, but he speaks to us on this overarching subject with an uncommon authority. This is partly due to the qualities we have already noticed, but other factors are at work too. One is his clarity – one of his leading values, learnt at Oxford. Although his vision is wonderfully luxuriant, it is always straightforward and lucid. What he writes is also mercifully free of the alienating portentousness and irresponsible fantasy of much grand theory. He always prefers a rich but well-grounded description of the way things actually are to an over-ambitious attempt to impose some simplifying, confining, regimenting system upon reality. His friend J. L. Austin summed up this restrained, realistic attitude in a marvellous aphorism that came to him in a dream: '*Neither a be-all nor an end-all be.*'<sup>10</sup> We should beware of bringing unexamined preconceptions and indefensible intellectual or moral ambitions to bear upon our experience. All bets are off. We cannot be sure in advance that everything will make sense, or at any rate the same kind of sense. This openness to the unexpected is well illustrated by his insistence, following Giambattista Vico, that the scientific

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<sup>9</sup> 'Man should be and do something.' J. G. Fichte, *Über das Wesen des Gelehrten, und seine Erscheinungen im Gebiete der Freiheit* (1793), lecture 4: *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. I. H. Fichte (Berlin, 1845–6), vi 383.

<sup>10</sup> J. L. Austin, 'Pretending' in id., *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1979), 253–71, at 271 note.

method cannot fully explain human behaviour, and that the distinctive 'inner' understanding that supplements it, and indeed takes priority over it in this arena, is not inferior to scientific understanding, but deeper and more complete as a route to making sense of human conduct.

Berlin's determination to describe reality with the minimum of distortion might be said to be the cardinal procedural rule he instinctively follows. It is part of what he meant when he described himself as 'empirically-minded'.<sup>11</sup> He glossed this description by saying: 'I think that all there is in the world is persons and things and ideas in people's heads – goals, emotions, hopes, fears, choices, imaginative visions and all other forms of human experience. That is all I am acquainted with.' And in his last essay he wrote: 'empirical experience is all that words can express – [...] there is no other reality'.<sup>12</sup> In the end, our experience is all we have to go on, and we must be true to it, in all its perhaps frustrating but also glorious variety. We must not be tempted by vast metaphysical or ideological schemes that ride roughshod over experience. They cannot be justified, and we must manage without them, even if we have what he described as 'a deep and incurable metaphysical need'<sup>13</sup> for the comfort they seem to provide, especially in the realm of values.

This phrase – 'a deep and incurable metaphysical need' – comes from the last paragraph of 'Two Concepts of Liberty', his inaugural lecture as an Oxford Professor. This is one of the most important paragraphs Berlin wrote, though one that may not have

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<sup>11</sup> CIB 32.

<sup>12</sup> POI 2.

<sup>13</sup> L 217.

been fully understood, perhaps partly because its message is so radically controversial. In it he describes human beings as pursuing ends 'without claiming eternal validity for them', but adds: 'Principles are not less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed.' He often returns to the unavailability of such guarantees, and for him this is a basic feature of our predicament. It applies across the board, not just in the moral realm on which he is focusing here. He insists that nothing, not even our deepest and most formative assumptions and the categories of thought that express them, can be guaranteed against change. 'Are categories metaphysical, absolute?' he asks. 'No,' he replies, 'I think that categories could, in principle, alter.'<sup>14</sup> Everything is contingent, in principle, including human nature, however constant or universal it may be in practice; nothing (apart from rules we invent ourselves) is necessary, bound to be as it is. We may long to have our most basic presuppositions and commitments underwritten by some eternal, transcendent dispensation – but this is exactly the 'deep and incurable metaphysical need' he thinks we must renounce if we are to grow up morally and shed the superstitions to which we are innately prone. As he says in the same paragraph, 'the very desire for guarantees that our values are eternal and secure in some objective heaven is perhaps only a craving for the certainties of childhood or the absolute values of our primitive past'. And then comes his famous quotation from Joseph Schumpeter: 'To realise the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them

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<sup>14</sup> UD 126.

unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian.’<sup>15</sup>

In his first draft of ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, Berlin adds, after quoting this sentence: ‘That appears to me to be the best statement that has ever been made about the character of our ultimate convictions.’ Indeed, the quotation might well be inscribed over the entrance to Berlin’s inner citadel. It is worth dwelling on, particularly because one term in it is so misleading. I mean the term ‘relative’, an unfortunate choice because it makes Berlin sound like a relativist, which he wasn’t, or at any rate didn’t intend to be. To say that one’s convictions are ‘relative’ gives the impression that they are indefensible against critics or enemies – arbitrary, subjective, merely a matter of personal preference. ‘I am in favour of kindness and you prefer concentration camps,’<sup>16</sup> as Berlin puts it. If that were really so, it would perhaps not be natural to speak of convictions rather than tastes, or to say that one wishes to defend them ‘unflinchingly’, even though, under liberalism, one is entitled to do so. I once asked Berlin if he would have used the word ‘relative’ in this context himself, given its capacity to mislead, and he agreed that he would not have. He suggested instead that he would have said that civilised people stand by their convictions even though they are ‘not eternal or universal’.<sup>17</sup> What he meant to point to by using the quotation was that even the categories and values that are most constant and basic in human history are nevertheless contingent, relative in a wider sense – relative, that is, to the way things happen to be,

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (London, 1943), 243.

<sup>16</sup> POI 11.

<sup>17</sup> Letter to Henry Hardy, 2 April 1991.

which cannot be guaranteed against change in the future, and may indeed have changed, for all we know, since the distant, unrecorded, past. He doesn't mean that he thinks deep change of this kind is realistically to be expected in any foreseeable circumstances; his point, rather, is a dramatic expression of the ultimately accidental nature of our world and all its contents, physical and cultural.

What is more, the convictions of specific individuals display a more local form of relativity, since they differ, within the crucial limits set by human nature, in relation to the position of those who hold them in time and space, their cultural environment, their personal circumstances, history, experiences and temperament. They are also chosen or accepted rather than prescribed, and are in that sense, too, relative – relative to a person's freely adopted conception of his or her own moral personality. Despite much vital common ground, there is not a single, complete set of convictions held by everyone, everywhere, at all times. This is the point at which Schumpeter's, and so Berlin's, barbarism and civilisation part company. 'Barbarians' regard their own beliefs as ahistorical, immutable, universal, a permanent part of the divinely ordained fabric of the universe. 'Civilised' people know that their convictions do not have this supernaturally guaranteed status, but they also know that this does not mean they are not justified in standing for these values unflinchingly – not only the values that are, or ought to be, common to all humanity as we know it, but also the values that are distinctive of their own specific, partly self-created, moral identity. They know that this is not a second-rate refusal to flinch, inferior when measured against the defence of metaphysically

absolute values, but the firmest kind of stand available to us, if we recognise how things really are.<sup>18</sup>

We might pause briefly here to note that, according to this account, civilisation is likely to remain a minority achievement, and barbarism the norm. This may be a discouraging prospect, but perhaps also a realistic one. One might also infer that most mainstream religious believers must be judged barbarian, which is not something one would expect Berlin to believe, still less to state. But it does seem to follow from what he says in the paragraph in question, unless I am very much mistaken.

I see the peroration of 'Two Concepts of Liberty' as the key to Berlin's inner citadel, or at least to one of the rooms of that citadel. It shows how his empirical realism goes right down to the deepest level of his understanding of our world. But he displays the same realism at all levels. Tellingly, he began his first book, on Karl Marx, with an epigraph from Bishop Joseph Butler about being true to reality. Butler wrote: 'Things and Actions are what they are, and the Consequences of them will be what they will be: Why then should we desire to be deceived?'<sup>19</sup> This, too, would be a good motto for Berlin's work as a whole, along with another remark of Butler's that Berlin liked to quote: 'Every thing is what it is, and not another thing.'<sup>20</sup> One of Berlin's greatest strengths was to

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<sup>18</sup> This is not an isolated statement by Berlin. In a letter of 30 December 1952 to Herbert Elliston, then editor of the *Washington Post*, he writes that he believes in 'a society in which liberty is more important even than happiness, people are forced to choose, though they do not necessarily like it, people do not accept supernatural or scientific sanctions for their ultimate ends but are content with the fact that they are ultimate for them individually (which is all that is ever true)'; and in *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, which dates from the same year, he says that part of 'the essence of liberty' is 'to stand up for your convictions merely because they are your convictions' (FIB 103–4).

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (London, 1726), sermon 7, 136 [§16].

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, 2nd ed. (London, 1729), xxix.

recognise, insist on and revel in the complexity, multiplicity and untidiness of human life, its irreducibility to a simple list of general truths. J. L. Austin captured this disposition well in another aphorism when he wrote, 'Why, if there are nineteen of anything, is it not philosophy?'<sup>21</sup>

Berlin acknowledged, of course, that to search for patterns and regularities is a basic human need and drive, and accepted that for many practical purposes, especially in the realm of science, we must abstract and generalise; but he never forgot that all abstraction and generalisation, of their very nature, eliminate the concrete particularities that feed them, and that in human life particularities are the bottom line: particular people, particular relationships, particular cultures, particular situations, particular values, needs, goals, ideals. The palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould captured this well when he wrote that 'everything interesting happens only once in its meaningful details'.<sup>22</sup> And Berlin himself wrote, summarising an extreme form of this view, held by the obscure eighteenth-century German pietist J. G. Hamann:

Hamann in the end recognises only the individual and his temperament, and he thinks that all attempts to generalise lead to the creation of faceless abstractions that are then taken for the individuals who are the raw material for the abstractions, with the consequence that theories propounded in terms of these abstractions do not touch the core of the

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<sup>21</sup> Reviewing Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1950, Religious Books Section [sic], xi. The review is reprinted in Oscar P. Wood and George Pitcher (eds), *Ryle* (London etc., 1971), where this remark occurs on p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted (without an exact source) in George F. Kennan, *At a Century's Ending: Reflections, 1982–1995* (New York, 1996), 315.

individuals whom they purport to describe or explain, and that legal, moral and aesthetic systems – every formulation of principles of action – either ignore the individuals from whose experience they are in the end drawn, or force them into some Procrustean bed of conformity to rules which certainly maim and may destroy them.<sup>23</sup>

Procrustes is the mythical Greek robber who forced his victims on to a bed and then cut or stretched them to fit. This is a useful metaphor for Berlin's opposition to enforced conformity at all levels. He was a natural champion of dissenters, irregulars, eccentrics – what he called, following Kipling, 'the toad beneath the harrow'<sup>24</sup> – against dogma, orthodoxy, oversimplification, regimentation, efficiency and standardisation, especially when imposed by cruel, intolerant measures. In a splendid passage at the end of a 1950 essay he writes:

Since no solution can be guaranteed against error, no disposition is final. And therefore a loose texture and toleration of a minimum of inefficiency, even a degree of indulgence in idle talk, idle curiosity, aimless pursuit of this or that without authorisation [...] will always be worth more than the neatest and most delicately fashioned imposed pattern. [...] Men [...] live by positive goals, individual and collective, a vast variety of them, seldom predictable, at times

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<sup>23</sup> TCE 352.

<sup>24</sup> TCE 350; the epigraph to Rudyard Kipling's poem 'Pagett, M.P.', in *Departmental Ditties and Other Verses* (Calcutta, 1886), 43, begins 'The Toad beneath the Harrow knows / Exactly where each tooth-point goes.'

incompatible. It is [...] through the absorbed individual or collective pursuit of these, more often than not without conscious hope of success, still less of the approbation of the official auditor, that the best moments come in the lives of individuals and peoples.<sup>25</sup>

Berlin's insistence on the primacy of the particular comes out in a number of ways, chief among which is his moral individualism. For him, the source and bearer of value is the individual, who should never be sacrificed to a mere abstraction. In his own words: 'men are ends in themselves because they are the sole source of all morality, the beings for whose sakes alone whatever is worth doing is worth doing [...], and there is therefore nothing outside them to which they can in principle be deemed worthy of sacrifice'.<sup>26</sup> Collective values are parasitic on those of individuals, and not the other way about, for all that we cannot live except in relation to others. In particular, the State is made for man, not man for the State. To quote Berlin again: 'the ultimate and only source of authority for the rightness or wrongness of legislation and wider social action is the moral sense of the individual';<sup>27</sup> and again, 'all that is ultimately valuable are the particular purposes of particular persons'.<sup>28</sup>

When we look with open eyes at the values that guide us, we find, contrary to centuries of theology and philosophy, that these values are distinct and multiple, not reducible to some blandly

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<sup>25</sup> L 92–3.

<sup>26</sup> PIRA 206.

<sup>27</sup> 'Democracy, Communism and the Individual' (1949), <<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/demcomind.pdf>>, 3.

<sup>28</sup> RT2 128.

unilluminating common denominator, and that they don't all pull in the same direction. Here again, reality is complex. Because of this, it is an enduring feature of our lot that we have to make hard choices, not just between right and wrong, but between right and right, and wrong and wrong, and we need both the political space and the personal resources to make these choices well. We must not be marshalled into some tidy system that ignores or eliminates the very differences that make life interesting and worthwhile. The last head of the institution where I work – Wolfson College in Oxford – once neatly summed up Berlin's view of human nature by saying that the main thing people have in common is that they differ from one another.

This brings us to the battleground between monism and pluralism, which lies at the heart of Berlin's vision. If there is any single element in his substantive outlook that is pre-eminent, it is this, together with its consequences. And it is this above all else that makes him so relevant to our own times, torn as they are by the strife that monism can, and does, create – much of it of religious origin. Again and again he warns against the illusion of thinking that there is a single, coherent solution to the problems of human life, applicable to all people, always, everywhere, and, worse, that we are entitled to impose such a solution by force. He writes:

Those, no doubt, are in some way fortunate who have brought themselves, or have been brought by others, to obey some ultimate principle before the bar of which all problems can be brought. Single-minded monists, ruthless fanatics, men possessed by an all-embracing coherent vision do not

know the doubts and agonies of those who cannot wholly blind themselves to reality.<sup>29</sup>

And again: 'It is a terrible and dangerous arrogance to believe that you alone are right: have a magical eye which sees the truth: & that others cannot be right if they disagree.'<sup>30</sup> And once more:

Happy are those who live under a discipline which they accept without question, who freely obey the orders of leaders, spiritual or temporal, whose word is fully accepted as unbreakable law; or those who have, by their own methods, arrived at clear and unshakeable convictions about what to do and what to be that brook no possible doubt. I can only say that those who rest on such comfortable beds of dogma are victims of forms of self-induced myopia, blinkers that may make for contentment, but not for understanding of what it is to be human.<sup>31</sup>

These passages return us to Berlin's remark about our 'deep and incurable metaphysical need' for transcendent guarantees. Civilised people must be on their guard against the barbarians who give in to such a deep need for certainty, because 'to allow such a need to determine one's practice is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity'.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> L 47.

<sup>30</sup> L 345.

<sup>31</sup> CTH 13–14.

<sup>32</sup> L 217.

Berlin's attack on moral monism may have been directly inspired, in the main, by the political totalitarianism of the twentieth century, especially in the Soviet Union and Germany, but it applies every bit as much to the blinkered self-righteousness and the baseless and arrogant certainty of the fanatical fundamentalists who spread terror in today's world. It applies, too, if in a less obviously dramatic way, to paternalist, managerial, technocratic tendencies in politics that undermine the freedom and dignity of individuals by overriding their need to make their own decisions and to take responsibility for their own lives. Because human beings are ends in themselves, they are not mere fodder for the purposes of others, and they must be left as free as possible to chart their own course among the conflicting values that confront them. This freedom is best protected, for Berlin, by a liberal political order, and this is why he was a liberal through and through.

I have of course only begun to scratch the surface of an answer to my own question about Berlin's inner citadel. In the first of the lectures on romanticism that he delivered in Washington in 1965, a lecture entitled 'In Search of a Definition', Berlin declaimed a huge, resounding, kaleidoscopic list of definitions of romanticism, many of them flatly contradictory, before asking what the essence of romanticism, if it had one, really was. One can imagine a similar list of Berlin's capacities and insights, not all of them compatible, drawn up in preparation for an attempt to capture the essence of his mind, if there is one. Some of those that I have picked out might be labelled modesty (both personal and intellectual), enthusiasm, insight, reach, realism, empiricism, refusal of guarantees, putting the particular first, recognition of multiplicity,

rejection of fanaticism. Each interpreter of Berlin will prioritise his contributions differently, will identify the essence of his outlook in different terms, though there is naturally common ground. But when all the summarising and labelling is done, all will agree that there remains an idiosyncratic residue that resists all categorisation: the unique, specific, irreplaceable human being whose intellectual, personal and literary styles were all markedly his own; an exhilarating, inspiring, provoking, enlarging, sometimes maddening, palpable presence given lasting posthumous life by his exuberant, sprawling, magnanimous body of writing – Isaiah Berlin.

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