



RULE OF THE FOX

Isaiah Berlin: Letters, 1928-1946, edited by Henry Hardy
Cambridge University Press, 752 pages, \$40

Reviewed by Justin Shubow

OF ALL OF THE POLITICAL philosophers of the last century, Isaiah Berlin most visibly, if unintentionally, heeded Lionel Trilling’s call for a liberalism of “variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty.” Rejecting the universalism and certitude of progenitors such as John Stuart Mill and contemporaries such as John Rawls, he offered us a political view of tempered ambitions and tentative foundations.

Unlike most philosophers, who obsess over intellectual parsimony, Berlin was temperamentally unable to pretend that the world is simpler than it appears. (This helps to explain why he eventually left academic philosophy for the history of ideas.) Unwilling to accept theoretical simplicity or tidiness where it did not belong, he rejected “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.” Instead, throughout his life’s work he painted a picture of a world in which the worthwhile ends of humanity are diverse and conflicting, a world in which values—such as justice, liberty, and equality—are not only irreducible and incompatible,

but also frequently incommensurable.

This collection of letters—which begins with Berlin as a precocious eighteen-year-old writing to G. K. Chesterton and ends with his time in the United States as a British diplomat—includes the early stirrings of these ideas and contributes to a fuller understanding of their inspiration. We see him as a young Oxford don struggling to write a book on “the splendid but repulsive” Karl Marx, serendipitously discovering in the process the writings of Aleksandr Herzen, the nineteenth-century Russian liberal who would become his hero. Although he found the Marx project to be such an ordeal that he would never write another monograph, his work on it endowed him with the vast intellectual background he would rely on for the rest of his life. As early as 1933 we see him quoting the line of Immanuel Kant’s that would virtually become his antiperfectionist credo: “Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.”

Far more than philosophy, however, one sees the impact of literature—especially that of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Henry James—in these letters. After describing a faux pas he committed on meeting Virginia Woolf for the first time—he was actually quite afraid of her—Berlin

Essential books by Isaiah Berlin:

*The Hedgehog and the Fox:
An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History*

Four Essays on Liberty

Russian Thinkers

*Against the Current:
Essays in the History of Ideas*

*The Crooked Timber of Humanity:
Chapters in the History of Ideas*

Biography of Isaiah Berlin:

Michael Ignatieff,
Isaiah Berlin: A Life

amusingly confesses, “I’ve never felt more like an inferior character in a Russian story who goes through a gamut of trivial emotions which he dramatises ad infinitum, including a minor crime which looms enormous & pursues him and grows into quite an alastor.”

Berlin’s acute literary sensibility would allow him to write his best-known essay, “The Hedgehog and the Fox.” Inspired by a fragment from the ancient Greek poet Archilochus, “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing,” Berlin playfully attempts to divide writers and thinkers into these two categories. Foxes—exemplified by Aleksandr Pushkin, Shakespeare, and Montaigne—are those who pursue multiple, often contradictory ends without being driven by a single unifying principle. Lacking a unitary vision, they accept and describe the world as it appears. They do not try to fit it into some preconceived scheme. Hedgehogs, by contrast, attempt to connect everything under an all-embracing central vision, one fixed idea that permeates all of their work. Their ranks include the likes of Dostoyevsky, Pascal, and Plato. But where does Tolstoy belong in this schema? Berlin spends the main part of the essay examining why it is so difficult to classify the great novelist. He concludes that Tolstoy was unusually conscious of this dichotomy and, as a result, inwardly torn because, though by nature a fox, he believed in being a hedgehog.

As a Russian-born British Jew learned in all of the main strands of European culture, Berlin’s own fox-like nature is not difficult to identify. (It is telling that some of his early letters are signed—in Cyrillic—*Shaya*, the diminutive Hebrew version of his Anglicized first name.) As one

would expect from a polymathic polyglot, his correspondence is peppered with obscure reference to literature, history, and politics in no fewer than seven languages. Henry Hardy, the full-time editor of Berlin’s unpublished writings, has provided exhaustive, if exhausting, notes. He has also opted for completeness over concision in selecting the letters. The result is a 700-page doorstopper, with two more volumes projected. Most readers would have preferred greater selectivity—just how many letters do we need of Berlin reporting to his mother on his health and hygiene?—but the tome’s size is perhaps appropriate for a man who, to borrow from Walt Whitman, contained multitudes.

As in his published essays, his writing style is elaborate, with sentences constructed like Matryoshka dolls, clauses nested within clauses. Unlike in his formal work, however, his epistolary style sometimes enters the stream of consciousness, as in this striking description of Chicago in 1941:

The waterfront—Lake Michigan—is magnificent, broad embankment, imaginatively built skyscrapers, a sense of width & wind and hanseatic opulence—behind this miles on miles of hideous noisy slums . . . with trams, overhead railways, buses, cars, pouring masses of standardized human beings, a vast confusion of electric signs going on & off, blinding one—& yet the people are simpler, more generous, homelier than in the East coast—like old pre-war Moscow in, say, 1890 versus Petersburg at the same time, ignorant, hospitable, 1000 miles away from the Atlantic, from Europe, from the war, a population much more *peasant*.

Such tidbits of observation make it easy to see why the British foreign office so prized his wartime dispatches from “fascinating semi-bar-

barous” America.

Curiously for a scholar in the making, the discussion of ideas, literary or otherwise, is relatively rare in these letters. Instead they are mainly about the people in his life. A famously voluble talker, Berlin was an inveterate gossip. “Life is not worth living unless one can be indiscreet to intimate friends,” he would write in his old age. During the time period covered here, Berlin was more observer than actor—a sexless, prematurely elderly man, as he himself recognized. This, together with his skills as a conversationalist, caused him to become a trusted confidant of many young men and women, giving him an eye-opening window on their private lives. In dealing with the variety and complexity of his friends’ experiences, he demonstrates an impressive capacity for empathy. That virtue would prove its worth to the young intellectual historian, who was able to get into the heads of thinkers with worldviews radically different from his own.

In fact, Berlin was quite willing—unusually so for a modern liberal theorist—to delve deeply into the alien minds of freedom’s enemies. He did so in part to better combat their ideas directly. But he also was motivated by the prototypically liberal thought that liberalism would be made stronger, and certainly more realistic, if it were forced to respond to its critics’ strongest claims. Berlin paid particular attention to his counter-Enlightenment opponents, since he thought that liberalism, as born out of the Enlightenment, suffered from the same intellectual deficiencies as its parent.

One major flaw Berlin wished to eliminate was what he saw as liberalism’s thin view of human

nature. It is useful here to think of Trilling, who once sympathetically quoted Mill advising his utilitarian friends that they would gain more from reading the “religious and conservative” Samuel Taylor Coleridge than the “short and easy” Jeremy Bentham, for the poet saw “further into the complexities of the human feelings and intellect.” In the counter-Enlightenment, Berlin found thinkers whose ideas ought to serve as a corrective to liberalism’s overly rosy view of human psychology. Consider, for instance, what Berlin wrote about Joseph-Marie de Maistre, whose work he considered an intellectual forerunner of fascism:

While all around him there was talk of the human pursuit of happiness, he underlined, again with much exaggeration and perverse delight, but with some truth, 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 historically at least as strong as the desire for peace, prosperity, liberty, justice, happiness, equality.

Liberals who do not recognize the darker side of human motivation, Berlin suggested, do so at their own peril. In particular, liberalism must avoid taking a naive view of its enemies, whether foreign or domestic. Though liberals may see themselves as eminently reasonable, irenic people, they must be careful not to assume that their self-stated foes are, too.

Another widespread human motivation to which Berlin thought liberals were blind was the desire for status, by which he meant the need for recognition or self-assertion. He saw that in the real world this desire commonly dominates wishes for freedom—and he apparently thought that on rare occasions the tradeoff could even be warranted. He would ask every would-be benevolent imperialist to remember that

if I am a slave, a colonial, a member of an “oppressed” class, I may prefer, in my bitter longing for status, to be bullied and misgoverned by some member of my own race or social class . . . that is, as an equal—to being well and tolerantly treated by someone from some higher and more remote group who does not recognise me for what I wish to feel myself to be.

Outsiders who bring freedom and other liberal values should not be surprised if they are not greeted with open arms; native despotism will often be preferred to foreign noblesse oblige.

Berlin’s acquaintance with the counter-Enlightenment did not just help to shape his liberalism, however. More important, the movement’s antiuniversalist tendencies and the special emphasis it gave to cultural differences helped him discover what would become his great intellectual enemy—namely, the view that “all genuine questions must have one true answer and one only . . . that there must be a dependable path towards the discovery of these truths . . . that the true answers, when found,

“an obscure journal . . .” —ALEXANDER COCKBURN

“The most useful political magazine in the United States today.” —RICHARD RORTY

Decide for yourself. Subscribe to



Yes, I'd like a subscription to DISSENT:

\$24/year \$40/two years students: \$17/year single copy: \$7.50

Check enclosed (drawn on U.S. currency). Add \$7 for postage outside the U.S.

Bill me VISA MasterCard Signature _____

Card No. _____ CCV # _____ Exp. Date _____

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

www.dissentmagazine.org
 Dissent, PO Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834-3000

5CR4F



must necessarily be compatible with one another and form a single whole.” He believed that this underlying assumption of Western thought from Socrates through the Enlightenment and up until the present was deeply flawed. More than any other notion, he argued, such flawed reasoning is “responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals—justice or progress or the happiness of future generations, or the sacred mission or emancipation of a nation or race or class, or even liberty itself, which demands the sacrifice of individuals for the freedom of society.” He called this ideal *monism*. He offered it as the root for totalitarianism and, hence, the main horrors of his time. Like Heinrich Heine before him, Berlin emphasized that ideas nurtured in the stillness of a professor’s study could destroy a civilization, and there is little doubt that Berlin, from the comfort of *his* study, hoped to slay the dangerously false doctrine of monism.

Its danger, he believed, stemmed from the ease with which the supposed existence of a perfect solution can be used to justify terrible acts. Monists who are striving to achieve their utopia inevitably must deal with recalcitrant facts that do not fit their worldview. There will always be stubborn people who reject their values or well-intentioned people who cannot voluntarily achieve what is asked of them. Because force and coercion are often the only way to handle such people, monists try to save their “theory” by procrustean tampering with the facts. The harm of such acts is purportedly outweighed by the enormous good that they are said to be for. Unlike Dostoyevsky, who would not sacrifice a single innocent baby for the sake of creating a perfect world, monistic utopians are often all too willing to sacrifice millions of

lives for their supreme goal. Ruthless consequentialists, they are prone to quote the adage, often attributed to Robespierre, that you cannot make an omelet without breaking any eggs.



Just as there is no
one best form of living,
no constellation of
values that should
apply everywhere,
there can be no one-
size-fits-all best form
of government.



As terrible as monism is, Berlin argues that it can lead to an even worse result: the denial of the very reality of the sacrifice. If only one thing, the ever-distant highest end, is of value, then the value of everything else becomes illusory. The eggs that are broken are actually worthless and therefore need not be counted or mourned. No tears ought to be shed, for nothing is lost in the sacrifice. In fact, strictly speaking, it cannot be said to be a sacrifice at all. There is no weighing of means and ends—only the highest end is real and valuable, and anything that allows us to achieve it is justified. Other illusory values are simply taken off the table. This denial of value allows monists to override their natural moral instincts. (In Stalin’s Soviet Union, a common saying was “Moscow does not believe in tears.”) Monists tend to develop the intellectual resources to rationalize away the inherent revulsion felt toward certain actions. For them, the task requires—both instrumentally and morally—emotional hardness. Indeed, a consequence of monism is that the instrumental *by definition* becomes

the moral. When a particular end is the only thing of value, all formerly moral and political problems become merely technical ones. Thus, we come to understand what Friedrich Engels meant when he advocated “replacing the government of persons by the administration of things.”

History and philosophy, then, according to Berlin, urge us to reject monism in favor of pluralism, “the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathising and deriving light from each other.” Values or ends, in this view, are irreducibly plural: “Everything is what it is: liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or a quiet conscience.” Berlin finds the notion of a perfect whole or an ultimate solution not just impossible in practice, but, more important, conceptually incoherent. He calls the notion of total human fulfillment—examples of which can be found in Plato’s conception of the *kallipolis*, Marx’s call for a classless society from which the state has withered away, and the utopian fantasies of philosophes such as the Comte de Saint-Simon—“a metaphysical chimera.” Pluralism rules out the possibility of perfection, since in any way of life values must conflict—not just in practice, but also by necessity—and this forces us to make painful tradeoffs. To take the classic examples: perfect liberty and perfect equality are inherently in conflict, as are justice and mercy, as are knowledge and happiness. It should be noted that this holds not just at the social level but also at the personal level—no individual’s values are fully compatible. In the end, Berlin’s view is a tragic one: loss is unavoidable, and when we are forced to sacrifice one value for another,

what we lose is usually different in kind from what we gain.

If, then, an ultimate solution is impossible and every choice we make may entail loss, how are we to choose? Although clashes between values are unavoidable, Berlin argues that by balancing claims and reaching compromises we can attempt to soften the collisions. Tradeoffs are required: “rules, values, principles must yield to each other in varying degrees in specific situations.” When choices are between incommensurable options, we cannot take the easy way out and simply apply a fixed set of principles; moral decision-making is not a computational act. The answer to the question of how to choose is unexciting, but far more difficult: it depends on the circumstances. Above all, we should try to avoid extremes of suffering and being forced into desperate situations in the first place.

What, more precisely, does Berlin think pluralism requires politically? He offers his answer in “Two Concepts of Liberty.” In this essay, he famously contrasts what he calls the *positive* and *negative* forms of liberty. The former is akin to self-mastery or self-realization; it answers the question, who controls me? Negative liberty, by contrast, is essentially freedom from coercion; it answers the question, how far am I controlled? It is paramount for Berlin that negative liberty is the more basic and important notion: “The fundamental sense of freedom is freedom from chains, from imprisonment, from enslavement by others. The rest is extension of this sense, or else metaphor.” Although positive liberty—that notion of liberty being *for* something—is not to be disvalued, history shows that its notion is highly vulnerable to dangerous abuse. After all, from the

supposition that people can be truly free in the positive sense only if they obey their true rational selves, it is all too easy to conclude that they ought to be forced to be free by enlightened authorities acting in their purported best interest. This sort of reasoning, Berlin believes, has been frequently used to justify all manner of atrocities. Though negative liberty, too, can be perverted when it is thought to require unrestricted economic laissez faire, Berlin holds that this abuse is much less likely since it is far removed from what most people mean when they think of freedom at its most basic.

Any fully human life, Berlin thinks, requires a significant measure of negative liberty and, therefore, he makes it an essential component of his argument. He emphasizes, however, that he neither claims negative liberty as an absolute value (after all, there are none) nor believes that “individual freedom is, even in the most liberal societies, the sole, or even the dominant, criterion of social action.” A consequence of his pluralism is that his view of politics is necessarily vague and incomplete; there is no underlying principle of liberty that we must follow without exception. Likewise, he never tells us just how much equality or justice or security is compatible with the minimum area of negative liberty, since such questions cannot be worked out in advance.

In other words, just as there is no one best form of living, no constellation of values that should apply everywhere, there can be no one-size-fits-all best form of government. Rather, there can and should be diverse liberalisms, each of which takes into account a particular society’s general pattern of life. The specifics of a political system ought to be determined by the society’s unique and evolving culture (i.e., the relative importance it grants to

various values), its history, and the ongoing struggle of its members to deal with the inevitable value conflicts within their way of life. Berlin requires that any political system engender a bare level of decency, but beyond that he is willing to countenance a much wider variety of forms of life than liberal thinkers traditionally have. He is, for example, quite amenable to nonchauvinistic forms of nationalism, a rare position for a twentieth-century liberal theorist.

Given that Berlin rejects the existence of any absolute values and finds nothing objectionable about a civilization’s values slowly changing over time, he might appear to be a relativist. This he denies adamantly, since he holds that the values he is concerned with are not arbitrary, subjective creations but are objectively found in the world: “their nature, the pursuit of them, is part of what it is to be a human being, and this is an objective given.” On top of this, he stresses that the ends that we may pursue are not infinite in number; there are only so many we can imagine or understand, even if we ourselves do not hold them dear. For instance, a people who worship trees simply because they are made of wood would fall beyond the human horizon—Berlin cannot conceive of what it would be like to live like that. We can and do morally communicate with members of far-removed cultures, and he views the existence of such mutual understanding—even in cases of vehement intercultural disagreement—as further evidence for the existence of objective values.

Although Berlin successfully navigates the straits between relativism and absolutism, he does not seem particularly eager to anchor his liberal outlook in any one place. In the surprising concluding paragraph of “Two Concepts of Liberty,” he

concedes, “It may be that the ideal of freedom to choose ends without claiming eternal validity for them . . . is only the late fruit of our declining capitalist civilisation: an ideal which remote ages and primitive societies have not recognised, and one which posterity will regard with curiosity, even sympathy, but little comprehension.” It turns out that those who seek unchanging verities in moral and political life are likely to be as successful

as those questing for simplicity. He denies, however, that apathy or nihilism should follow from this. Taking up a defiant, even existentialist, pose, he quotes Joseph Schumpeter: “To realise the relative validity of one’s convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian.”

Has a liberalism of greater complexity and difficulty ever been defended? The agony Berlin appar-

ently suffered in taking his stand undoubtedly makes him a singular figure among liberal theorists. The old fox, revealed here in his youthful meditations, would never possess the certitude enjoyed by so many other political philosophers. But by refusing to blind himself to reality and boldly reconciling himself to inescapable doubt, he perhaps ended up with a wiser, and more mature, ideal. ●

WHY CAN'T A WOMAN BE MORE LIKE A MAN?

Women's Lives, Men's Laws, by Catharine MacKinnon
Harvard University Press, 576 pages, \$39.95

Reviewed by Judith McCue

IN HIS MISBEGOTTEN EFFORT to turn the wallflowers of science into duchesses of Harvard University, President Lawrence Summers had the rotten luck to snare himself in the nature versus nurture trap just as Catharine MacKinnon’s essay collection *Women’s Lives, Men’s Laws* hit bookstore display tables. The Harvard faculty’s vote of no confidence in their president will do the sales of MacKinnon’s book no harm at all—not that she needs much help. But the éminence grises who advise university presidents could well use the help of MacKinnon who, in the past quarter century, has described the structure of society and its supporting institutions as based on a hierarchy that assumes men are born to rule and women designed to serve. Professor of Law at the University of Michigan, MacKinnon has distinguished herself as a writer,

a social scientist, a human rights advocate, a pioneer of the landmark 1986 sex harassment law, and an uncompromising campaigner against the exploitation and abuse of women and children through the commercial production and consumption of pornography. MacKinnon does not simply condemn pornography, but also claims that the dominance hierarchy based on perceived sex differences is built into the very fabric of our legal system.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, let me explain at the outset why MacKinnon’s arguments in *Women’s Lives, Men’s Laws* are relevant to the troubles of the embattled Harvard president. Summers tapped unawares into the heart of MacKinnon’s analysis. She attacks a social hierarchy that justifies discrimination by claiming that “either it is said that there is no inequality there, because the sexes are

different, or the inequality is conceded but is said to be justified by the sex difference, that is, women’s innate inferiority by nature.” In her essay titled “Of Mice and Men,” she uses a literary reference to Steinbeck to explain how the hierarchy works: “Women are the animals of the human kingdom, the mice of men’s world. Both women and animals are identified with nature rather than culture by virtue of biology. Both are imagined in male ideology to be thereby fundamentally inferior to men and hu-

